

Are you being served?

Benchmarking resident satisfaction data:
consultation response



Introduction

Over the course of March and April 2012 the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a consultation which sought the views of councils on a proposed set of resident satisfaction questions.

The proposal was that these questions would be used on a voluntary basis by authorities in their own local general population surveys and, providing the methodology meets certain quality criteria, that they could then be used by the sector for benchmarking.

This consultation therefore also sought the views of councils on the proposed guidance on quality criteria and methodology.

The consultation generated responses from over 120 councils. This document summarises and addresses the key issues raised by consultees and explains the changes that have been made to the guidance as a result of the consultation.

The final guidance has been published as a separate document, which can be accessed via <http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform>.

More specific queries raised during the consultation have been addressed in the LG Inform Knowledge Hub group wiki. This will also be a place to post questions on an ongoing basis. Please click here to register and access the group: <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/lginform>

Background

In July 2011, the LGA launched Local Government Inform (LG Inform), 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 with other councils. For more information about LG Inform and to register please see: <http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform>.

With the cancellation of the Place Survey in 2010, there has been no up to date comparable data on resident satisfaction contained within LG Inform. However, 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.

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

Whilst there was demand for some comparative data, there was 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 a

technical review to help develop a set of questions and accompanying guidance that councils can choose to use in their own local surveys.

The entire review is described in more detail in *Are you being served? Benchmarking residents' perceptions of local government – Technical review of perception measures*, which can be accessed via the following link:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform>.

LGA and the London Councils Self Improvement Board drew on the results of this review to produce a set of questions and accompanying guidance that councils can choose to use in their own local surveys. The proposal was that, should authorities use these, it would enable them to input their local results into LG Inform, and make reasonable, 'fit for purpose', comparisons of their results with those of others.¹

The consultation asked for views on the questions and guidance, and the remainder of this document addresses the key issues raised by consultees and explains the changes that have been made to the guidance as a result of the consultation.

Consultees' views on the overall approach

Consultees were generally very positive about the need to benchmark resident satisfaction and supportive of the approach suggested. Nearly three quarters of consultees were positive about the exercise, and stated that they were keen to benchmark against other authorities²:

- *“Yes, the main benefits are twofold. Firstly, to measure overall performance levels of our organisation to inform efficiency improvements and higher-level strategic outcomes. Secondly, to determine the overall trends across the country to assist in evaluating whether variables are changing due to global, national, or local influences.”*
- *“Yes, resident perspectives are important to us and being able to benchmark this data (alongside performance and financial data) provides context.”*
- *“[The council] feels that the ability to load responses to its research work onto LG Inform is very important. Indeed the county council incorporates the views of its citizens into all policy and strategic decisions. Leading on from this, in the absence of any benchmarking opportunity the county council would like to use LG Inform to provide the opportunity to benchmark its performance against other councils.”*

In addition, just under a quarter of consultees were generally positive, but expressed some concerns. For example, consultees emphasised that the success and value of benchmarking will depend on how many authorities participate and, more specifically, whether other authorities against which they wish to compare themselves use the same methodology. There are a few things to say about this:

¹ In addition, councils within London will be able to share their results with London Councils for benchmarking purposes.

² Note that this doesn't mean that all of these authorities would necessarily participate.

- This is a new approach and it will take some time to build up a critical mass of participating authorities.
- We would encourage councils to liaise with other councils that they may want to compare themselves to, in order to commit to participating, to coordinate methodology and possibly even to achieve economies of scale through joint commissioning. We are aware of one regional group that has already started this process.
- We are aware of several existing performance and benchmarking groupings of councils. We will be working with these groups to encourage them to adopt the approach and we will also make public a list of such groups so that authorities that aren't linked in can find a group that might be of relevance.
- We will set up a wiki within the LG Inform Knowledge Hub group where councils can log their intention to conduct a benchmarking survey using a given methodology, and in this way liaise with each other.

In some authorities there is some internal debate over the value of benchmarking, and a small number of consultees requested more information to demonstrate this value. In response to this, the LG Inform Knowledge Hub group will be developed over time to share case studies and good practice in terms of how the intelligence from this benchmarking is being used by councils.

Several other issues were raised around the approach, and these are addressed below:

- **Partners:** A couple of consultees noted that there would be advantages to widening this exercise to include other public sector bodies/partners (such as the police). Whilst enabling partners to benchmark on their own issues is outside the scope of this exercise, the flexibility of the approach does enable local surveys to be carried out in partnership with other organisations.
- **Trends:** Throughout the consultation, some authorities were concerned about making any changes that would disrupt their local trends. We understand this, and it will be a matter of local preference as to whether local trends are more important than benchmarking against other authorities. However we hope that disruption will be small, and trends will be built up again relatively quickly, but with the added value of wider comparability.
- **Cost and resources:** The current financial situation has impacted on the number of general resident surveys that are currently being conducted. We recognise that this is not currently a priority for all authorities and not all will participate. In order to help ensure that those who do want to participate have a large enough group to compare against, we will work with existing performance groups to help authorities coordinate survey activity.

Consultees were also asked for their views on the approach of allowing local flexibility by enabling authorities to include these questions in their own local surveys rather than conducting a standard, nationally agreed survey. Nearly three quarters of consultees were positive about the flexible approach suggested:

- *“Flexibility allows authorities to fit these questions in with their own consultation programme and surveys rather than a prescribed country wide*

survey. This flexible approach is cost effective and makes the data collected comparable to others parts of the country for benchmarking purposes.”

- “This approach will undoubtedly lead to higher take-up by authorities, which will in turn benefit all involved by generating more robust benchmarking data. It also allows us to add our own questions, which may include some which change each time to provide a snapshot or seasonal view of resident perception/satisfaction.”

Most of the remaining consultees felt there were drawbacks to the approach in terms of the impact on data quality, but that on balance it is the best compromise given the current financial situation.

Data quality criteria

Data collection methods

The consultation proposal

Telephone, face to face, postal and online methods of data collection can be used; the advantages and disadvantages of each are discussed in *Are you being served? Benchmarking residents' perceptions of local government – Technical review of perception measures*. However the mode of data collection can have a marked impact on results, meaning that intra-mode comparisons are not desirable. Therefore, data included for comparison in LG Inform will be displayed grouped into common methods to ensure that only like-for-like data is compared across councils.

The vast majority of consultees supported the proposition that LG Inform will not allow intra-mode comparisons. **Therefore no changes have been made to this section.**

However, there was some concern that the division of results into different methodologies might mean that there would not be a large enough number of authorities using the same methodology for comparison purposes (and of the type and region that a given council would want to compare themselves to). Our approach to this issue is outlined in the ‘Consultees’ views on the overall approach’ section above.

Postal and online data

The consultation proposal

One form of intra-mode comparison that can be valid is online and postal, as long as the respondent experience is the same for both.

Responses suggested that some clarification is needed on the role of online surveys and in particular under what, if any, circumstances ‘online only’ general population surveys would work (as opposed to online in conjunction with a postal survey).

In theory, if a council had evidence that the vast majority of their residents had email addresses and had email addresses for the vast majority of these residents then there would be no problem using these records to draw a sample for an online survey.³

However we are not aware that there are any councils in this situation, therefore in practice it is likely that the only time online surveys would be permitted is if they were used in conjunction with a postal survey (i.e. a postal survey is sent to all respondents, and these respondents are given the opportunity to complete either the paper copy or an online version). It is important that in this situation the online link is only available to respondents who were sent the paper survey.

The approach of giving postal survey respondents the opportunity to respond online is permitted, because the technical review found that this is the one case where intra mode comparison is valid, as long as the respondent experience is the same for both. There were some queries as to what this would mean in practice for the online version. In this case, the online version could include routing but only if the same routing was also used in the postal form (this is likely to exclude the use of complex routing).

In summary, no changes have been made to this section, although some clarifications have been added.

Sampling

The consultation proposal

Two types of sampling are permitted, in addition to a census approach:

- Random sampling (whereby all population members/households have a random one in 'n' chance of being selected) is favoured for all methods of data collection.
- In addition, a census approach, where every member of the target population is contacted, would also be permitted.
- For self completion methods (postal or online) a random sampling or census approach must be used.
- For telephone and face to face surveys, quota sampling is also permitted.

When uploading data to LG Inform you will be asked to specify which sampling approach was used.

Analysis of responses to the consultation suggested that the final guidance needed to be clearer that only surveys that use all residents as the sample frame are valid (i.e. general population surveys). Service, topic or area specific surveys that only

³ In this case councils would also need to ensure that they had considered all data protection issues – i.e. that they had the permission to use these email addresses in a survey.

draw a sample from a subset of the general population will not be appropriate for benchmarking.

The most common issue brought up by consultees around sampling was the exclusion of residents panels. This is discussed in further detail below.

The consultation proposal

Authorities that have obtained satisfaction data through residents panels will not be able to upload this for benchmarking purposes. This is because there is strong evidence to suggest a considerable response bias among panel members, which makes it inadvisable to compare data collected via this method with general population data.

A significant minority of consultees currently use residents panels to collect residents' views as they do not have the resources available to undertake a full survey. These consultees argued strongly for the ability to be able to compare their results to others who have also used panels.

In recognition of the importance of this issue, and the need to find a balance between maintaining the integrity of LG Inform, the quality and genuine insight offered by the data versus giving councils what they have requested, this issue was taken to the LGA's Improvement Board for discussion. **The Board upheld the decision not to include residents panels.**

The reason for this is the response bias as described in the consultation document. There are three main reasons for this bias. First, because residents panels are often not randomly selected using the whole population as a sample frame, they are not statistically representative. This means that it would be difficult to distinguish whether any differences in results are real or related to respondent selection. Secondly, the act of volunteering to become a panel member marks a panellist out as different to someone who has not volunteered to do so, so the overall results cannot be considered representative. Thirdly, the inclusion of a resident on a panel inevitably changes them over time, and panel members become more knowledgeable than residents in general. This is also affected by the number of times they are contacted, and how often the panel is refreshed.

That is not to say that panels can't be useful - many local authorities use them to gauge reactions to prospective local budgets or particular policy issues, and they can form a useful consultative tool. There is certainly a place for residents panels in the basket of research and consultation tools available to local authorities, but their limitations should be understood. One of these limitations is that they are not appropriate for benchmarking.

Weighting and sample size

The consultation proposal

Where a random sampling or census approach has been used, data should then be weighted to the known profile of the local population.

Variables that are typically used for weighting in residents' surveys include age, gender and social grade (or work status as a proxy for social grade), although other variables such as household size are sometimes used as well. We have not specified exactly which variables the data should be weighted on as this will vary by population and dataset.

A number of respondents requested clarification on the weighting requirements for benchmarking. The issues for which guidance was requested have been addressed in the bullets below:

- **Variables to weight on:** Some respondents queried whether different areas weighting by different variables would affect comparability. The purpose of weighting is to make a sample representative if it is not already. What is appropriate will depend very much on the way the survey was sampled and on local circumstances. Therefore **we have not specified which variables should be used for weighting**. Whilst weighting on different variables may have a small impact on comparability, this is much less than other factors such as question ordering. There will be some small impact on comparability but this is a level we consider acceptable as part of the flexible approach of the overall exercise.
- **Capping:** Similarly, **we have not suggested a maximum level for capping**, as the appropriate level will vary for different areas. However we would offer the following advice: if a council finds that they have extreme weights and is therefore considering capping, we would suggest that the council look again at its weighting strategy. It may well be, and is usually the case, that a simpler weighting strategy would be more effective.
- **Guidance on weighting:** Finally, there were some requests for more guidance on how to go about weighting. However, the purpose of this guidance is to advise on what criteria need to be met in order to achieve benchmarking. It is not a guide on how to conduct a survey. Therefore **providing guidance on how to weight is beyond the scope of this document**. We would suggest seeking the guidance of a statistician in order to ensure the weighting process is carried out properly.
- Authorities might also want to join the Local Area Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) Knowledge Hub group, to connect with others who have undertaken weighting or discuss issues around weighting. Click here to register with the group: <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/lariagroup>

The consultation proposal

The impact of weighting is to reduce the effective sample size. In order to ensure that comparisons are meaningful, only data with an effective base of 500 or greater should be uploaded to LG Inform for comparison.

Some consultees questioned the requirement for a minimum effective sample size of 500, with some respondents from larger authorities feeling this is too small but those from smaller authorities stating that this would be challenging to achieve.

The decision to set the minimum effective sample size at 500 was a pragmatic one. It allows some degree of subgroup analysis (such as gender and broad age groups) and is reliable to +/-4% at the 95% confidence level. At the same time, it recognises the difficulties that authorities with small populations had in the past with achieving the effective sample of 1,100 that was required by the Place Survey. Authorities can of course choose to use a higher sample size if they prefer. Therefore **the guidance maintains the requirement of a minimum achieved effective sample size of 500.**

Seasonality

The consultation proposal

We do not require you to conduct the survey at any particular time of year. However when uploading your results please give a brief explanation of the time of year that the survey was conducted. If there was a significant national or local event (such as bad snowfall or the riots) close to the period of fieldwork which may have impacted on results, you can record this in the same place.

Whilst there is a chance that not specifying a particular time period for carrying out each survey might have some small impact on comparability, most respondents agreed that this was a reasonable trade off for the flexibility to conduct surveys at the time of year that best suits them. Further, information on the time of year that the data was collected will be available, and this can be taken in to consideration when interpreting results.

Therefore, no changes have been made to the recommendations around seasonality.

We have also added a clarification in the guidance that **results will be displayed in LG Inform in financial years. Authorities will be able to upload one set of results per method per year.**

Don't know and refuse to answer

The consultation proposal

It is important that the 'don't know' and 'refuse to answer' options for each question

are dealt with consistently within each data collection method. The requirements below reflect the most common approach to dealing with these answer options for each of the different methods.

Telephone

Do not include an explicit reference to 'don't know' or 'refuse to answer' in the answer option list.

The interviewer can however code these answers if they are given spontaneously.

Face to face

Show cards should be used. These should not include an explicit reference to 'don't know' or 'refuse to answer'.

The interviewer can however code these answers if they are given spontaneously.

Postal and online

'Don't know' should be included as an explicit option in the answer list.

In postal surveys, respondents will have the option to refuse to answer by simply not filling in the question. In order to remain consistent, respondents should be allowed to leave the question blank when completing online.

No issues came up with regard to the treatment of 'don't know' and 'refuse to answer' at the point of interview, therefore **our recommendations have not changed**. However feedback was received on the way these answer options are reported; this is covered in the following section.

Reporting percentages

The consultation document proposed that 'don't know' should be excluded when reporting percentages. Several consultees made the point, however, that 'don't know' is a valid answer and an informative finding – for example it can indicate that a council needs to address communications issues.

However many councils are keen to continue the Place Survey approach of excluding 'don't know' when reporting.

Therefore, going forwards, LG Inform will display results in two ways:

- 1. Including 'don't know' when calculating percentage results, and reporting the percentage who answered 'don't know'.**
- 2. Excluding 'don't know' when calculating results.**

The core questions

The consultation proposed three questions as the core set that had been identified as being of strategic and practical importance in terms of helping councils understand the extent to which their residents are satisfied with their performance.

Participation is entirely voluntary. However those councils who do choose to participate in the benchmarking would need to include all of the core questions in order to participate, to provide a consistent and robust set of benchmarking data for the benefit of the whole sector.

This section outlines the consultation response to these questions.

Definition of local area

The consultation proposal

Many of the questions in this set ask respondents about their 'local area'. Please include the following text at the start of your survey to ensure that this is being interpreted consistently:

“Throughout this survey we ask you to 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.”

Several consultees were concerned about this definition; however we have considered the responses on this and, on balance, **have maintained the definition as it is**. It is clear that currently no definition exists which fully meets the needs of all authorities, but this definition has the support of the majority and is fit for purpose. Below we have outlined some of the objections and explain why we think this definition remains the best solution.

Some respondents stated that different groups of people walk very different distances in 15-20 minutes. However, the questions aim to get a general perception of the area rather than a definitive view on a specific geographic diameter. The purpose is to show the respondent they are being asked about an area wider than their immediate street but not as far as, for example, a high street that they would have to drive to.

Some counties and rural areas stated that this definition did not work for them, for example one rural area stated that in their authority, people may feel a link to their village or local town. In these situations, authorities may want to consider including supplementary questions, focusing specifically on villages or towns as appropriate. However, other counties and rural authorities supported the proposed definition.

Finally, one county stated *“While we try to clarify the services that we run as opposed to the district councils, people often (understandably) confuse the two. By defining local as ‘15-20 minutes walking distance’, people will be encouraged to think of the more immediate services that are provided by district councils in our area (for example waste collections). Conversely, they are unlikely to think of more ‘remote’ social care type services which account for the bulk of our budget expenditure.”* However, the questions that use the term 'local area' all ask about the area as a whole, not the services provided by one council or another. All questions in the set that ask specifically about a particular council, name the individual council rather than using the local area definition.

Question A: Satisfaction with the local area

The consultation proposal

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?

Respondents were generally positive about including this as a core question, with no significant issues raised about the question wording or response scale (with the exception of comments about the definition of local area, which is discussed above).

This question 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, as it is easy to answer, giving respondents the confidence to answer the rest of the questionnaire. **Therefore the final guidance retains this as a core question.**

Follow on questions

A couple of respondents stated that they would like to immediately follow this question and some others in the set with a follow on question asking people to explain their answer, or why they are dissatisfied.

In terms of the impact that this would have on benchmarking, this approach would be acceptable for many of the questions in this set. Authorities are advised to check the question ordering requirements for each individual question. However, it will not be possible for this question as it could impact answers to the next core question. The only way that we could allow a council to do this without disrupting the benchmarking would be if all participating councils included it, and there was not a strong enough demand to justify adding this.

Further, open ended questions are harder for the respondent to answer and can therefore harm response rates if included too early in the survey. We would suggest instead adding an open question towards the end of the survey asking the respondent if there is anything further they would like to say about the council and how it runs things.

Introducing the local authority

The consultation proposal

The following preamble should be inserted before the first question that asks specifically about a named local authority.

“Your local area receives services from [name of council]. [Name of council] is responsible for a range of services such as refuse collection, street cleaning, planning, schools, social care services and road maintenance.”

A slightly adjusted preamble will be used depending on which scenario the survey

fits:

- Designed to understand perceptions of a single tier authority.
- In a two tier area but designed to understand perceptions of a district only, or a county only.
- Designed to understand perceptions of both the district and county.

Respondents were generally positive about this, and **therefore the guidance retains the recommendation to include the preamble**. However, some issues were raised and these are addressed below:

- **Single tier authorities:** Consultees from several single tier councils gave the impression that they did not think this aspect of the guidance was relevant to them, suggesting that they had misunderstood or not fully read this section of the guidance. The final guidance has therefore highlighted more clearly that single tier authorities must also include the preamble to ensure effective benchmarking. The guidance section has also been renamed – from ‘two tier issues’ to ‘introducing the local authority’.
- **The list of services:** A small number of authorities requested flexibility as to which services to list in the preamble. Unfortunately this will not be possible as it would have a negative impact on benchmarking. Allowing local flexibility would give the potential to manipulate results by highlighting services that are known to be particularly highly rated locally.
- Some other respondents requested a longer list of services be referred to in the preamble. We do not recommend this. First, space is at a premium for many councils, who would not wish to increase the length of the preamble. Secondly, it is unlikely that respondents would want to read/listen to a preamble much longer than that proposed. Thirdly, the purpose of the preamble is to be clear to respondents which council they are being asked about, rather than trying to inform them about everything that each council does.
- A couple of respondents made the point that schools should be excluded as many are now leaving local authority control, and authorities have a wider remit than just schools. **Therefore the recommended preamble now instead refers to education** in recognition of the fact that authorities have responsibility for adult education and early years education as well as some schools.
- **Methodological objections:** some respondents were concerned that the preamble might be leading. In particular, one respondent stated that, rather than informing people in the questionnaire, we should allow those who are unsure about which council does what to use the ‘don’t know’ option. Our view is that the preamble text has a valid role in ensuring respondents are clear which organisation they are actually being asked about and to help them answer the question, rather than swaying their answer. Further, as the text is fixed for all councils, if there was any impact on answers, the impact would be

the same for all councils, meaning there would be no impact on the benchmarking of results.

Question B: Satisfaction with the local authority

The consultation proposal

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way [name of council] runs things?

The majority of respondents supported the inclusion of this as a core question, with no significant comments regarding the question wording or answer scale. Therefore **the final guidance retains this as a core question.**

Repeating questions in two tier areas

The consultation proposal

If the questionnaire is being conducted by a district and county in partnership, the guidance requires that those questions which name an individual local authority should be repeated.

Some respondents suggested that, in order to save space, this should be dealt with as two answer lines under one question, rather than being asked once for each council. With this in mind, for postal and online surveys, **space saving grids such as in the following format would also be permitted:**

2. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way:

- a) [name of district council] runs things?
- b) [name of county council] runs things?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
[name of district council]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
[name of county council]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In this case, councils may want to embolden or underline the two different council names to ensure the questions are well signposted and respondents are clear about which council they are answering about.

Based on some confusion in consultation responses, the guidance has also clarified that if a county or district is conducting a survey only about their council, there is no requirement to repeat the question.

Question C: Value for money

The consultation proposal

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

There were mixed views about this question, and in particular the suggested preamble. Having considered responses to the consultation, we have decided on balance to **retain this as a core question**.

The most common concern raised was that residents don't have enough information about council finances to respond to this question. Some consultees felt this could be mitigated by providing more information in the question text (such as the proportion of council tax which goes to each council in a two tier area).

However, the purpose of this question is to obtain a general perception rather than an assessment based on detailed knowledge. In fact, reassuring respondents of this is the purpose of the preamble. If the authority provides good value for money but respondents don't perceive this to be the case based on the information they already have and what they see, then this flags a communications issue for the council.

Further, if spend information was to be included this would have to be balanced, so all forms of council income such as the revenue support grant and income from fees and charges would need to be mentioned. As well as being impractical, this would change the nature of the question and make it unsuitable for inclusion in a general satisfaction survey.

Question ordering – core questions

The consultation proposal – core questions

Respondents' answers to the questions in this section may be influenced by questions asked earlier in a survey (this is known as 'context' and 'position' effects). For example, if a question about general satisfaction with an area is asked after a

series of questions about crime, this is likely to elicit a more negative response than for a different authority that preceded this with questions about parks and leisure.

The core satisfaction questions must therefore be placed at the beginning of the survey and in the order specified to ensure that any position or context effect is the same for each council. This will help ensure that any comparisons between councils are robust and fair.

Mixed views were expressed on the question ordering requirements set out in the consultation document. Whilst many were happy to adhere to this, there was a concern amongst some about the impact that following these requirements could have on the 'flow' of their overall survey.

Whilst we recognise that this may prove challenging in some scenarios, we have decided to **keep these question ordering requirements in place**. The recommendations made on question ordering were based on analysis of the literature and evidence on the impacts of question ordering, which concluded that the question ordering requirements are a key element of benchmarking in that they ensure the results are truly comparable.

In recognition that the approach must allow local flexibility where possible, we have kept ordering requirements to the minimum that we judge to be acceptable in terms of data quality.

For those questions that we have recommended ordering in a specific way, the evidence shows that responses to these questions will significantly change depending on their position in the questionnaire. If these questions are put in different places in different surveys, there will be no way to tell whether differences in results are due to factors relating to individual councils or merely because one was asked at the start of the survey whilst another was asked after, for example, a series of questions about anti social behaviour, which would likely elicit a more negative response.⁴

With regard to the impact on flow, it is our judgement that the requirements still allow room for a well designed and logical survey.

Some councils wanted to be able to 'set the scene' and ask respondents to consider certain specific issues before making a judgement on overall satisfaction. However, as different councils would use different questions this would not work for benchmarking for the reasons discussed above. Placing the core questions at the start offers a 'top of mind' reaction from respondents – and this will be the case for all participating authorities so none will be disadvantaged.

⁴ This point is illustrated by an experiment in one council during 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. Asking satisfaction with council before value for money resulted in a higher percentage of satisfied residents (54 per cent compared to 40 per cent).

The second tier questions

The consultation proposed a set of ‘second tier questions’ which had been identified as being of strategic and practical importance in terms of understanding council performance and resident satisfaction.

Unlike the core questions that must all be included in order to participate in the benchmarking, authorities are free to use only those second tier questions they would like to include.

This section outlines the consultation response to these questions.

Question D: Community identity

The consultation proposal

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

Whilst many respondents were positive about this question in its current form, a number of concerns were raised. Primarily these were around the definition of local area, and this issue has been covered in the ‘definition of local area’ section above. Some respondents would prefer to use ‘immediate neighbourhood’ to maintain consistency with the Place Survey. However the change is small and we consider that consistency within the set of questions is more important, to avoid confusing the respondent. Therefore the final guidance will maintain the term local area.

Two respondents stated that this question will be affected by the demographic profile of the area and this would make comparisons difficult. However, the purpose of the benchmarking is exactly to look at such differences and use this as a starting point for investigation. LG Inform contains demographic and other socio economic data which might explain any differences – and when differences cannot be easily explained by such data, councils have the opportunity to learn from each other as to what they might be doing differently.

In summary, the final guidance will keep this as a second tier question in its current form.

Question E: Community safety

The consultation proposal

How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area after dark?

How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area during the day?

Overall, respondents were positive about including this as a second tier question, with no major comments about question wording or response scales. Therefore **the final guidance retains this as a second tier question.**

However two specific queries were raised, which warrant further discussion:

- **Additional options:** One respondent wanted to ask respondents how safe they feel when in their own home, whilst another wanted to ask how safe they feel overall. There was not enough demand to add either of these options as part of the benchmarking. However, if individual authorities wanted to add additional options such as these after asking about safety after dark and during the day, we do not consider that this would have a significant detrimental impact on the benchmarking questions. Therefore, the guidance has been updated to allow it.
- **Other partners:** some respondents suggested that this information is already collected by the police in their area. In those situations, we would allow the authority to upload the police collected data as long as the relevant quality criteria have been met by the police. The relevant criteria for this question are the data quality guidance, local area definition and ordering requirements for this specific question.

Question F: Informed about the council

The consultation proposal

Overall, how well informed do you think [name of council] keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?

By benefits we mean any positive impacts it has had on the local area.

Whilst many respondents were positive about this question in its current form, a number of concerns were raised, in particular arising from the explanatory text.

- **Referring to ‘benefits’:** a common concern related to the reference to benefits in the question. Some respondents stated that services and benefits are two different things and should be dealt with separately. Several advocated removing benefits from the question altogether. However the purpose of this question is to take a holistic look at how well informed people feel generally about everything the council does, and to focus only on services would exclude a significant proportion of activity.
- **Referring to the local area:** a couple of respondents noted that ‘local area’ might not be the most appropriate term for this question, given that we have defined it to mean ‘*within 15 – 20 minutes walking distance from your home*’.
- **Referring to ‘positive impacts’:** A concern was raised around how a respondent would answer if they do not feel that their authority has had any positive impacts.

Overall, it has not been possible to find explanatory text that works well and to the satisfaction of everybody. Although an explanation would be helpful, in cognitive testing, interviewees were able to answer the original question (without the explanation) with relative ease and identify how satisfied they felt with general communications from their council. The original wording has a history dating back to

the 70s, and has been used to explain drivers of satisfaction; therefore **we have decided to leave the question wording and response scale in its original form without the explanatory text.**

The third tier questions

The consultation proposed a set of ‘third tier questions’ which had been identified as being of particular interest to many, but not all councils.

Therefore, unlike the core questions that must all be included in order to participate in the benchmarking, authorities are free to use only those third tier questions they would like to include.

This section outlines the consultation response to these questions.

Question G: Advocacy

The consultation proposal

On balance, which of the following statements comes closest to how you feel about [name of council]?

Not all respondents were positive about this question, but overall there was enough demand to keep it as a third tier question for use by those authorities that are interested in this issue.

However a couple of valid points were made about the proposed response scale, and we have made changes to reflect this. In particular, one respondent noted an inconsistency in that the positive response statements use “I speak” whereas the negative statements use “I am”.

There were also a couple of queries about the placement of the neutral response statement after the positive and negative statements rather than in the middle of the response scale. Some versions of this question place the neutral response at the end and some place it in the middle. We agree that there should be consistency within the question set, therefore the guidance has been updated with the neutral response in the middle.

Taking these above points in to account, **the guidance includes the following revised response scale:**

I speak positively of the council without being asked
I speak positively of the council if I am asked about it
I have no views one way or another
I speak negatively about the council if I am asked about it
I speak negatively about the council without being asked
Don't know

Some respondents questioned the purpose and added value from this question. It is distinct from the overall satisfaction question as it is much more active – advocates of council services share their positive views with friends, family and colleagues. It is a useful measure for those councils interested in understanding their reputation and can be combined with more in depth questions to look at issues such as, for example, the effectiveness of council communications.

Councils can also look in more depth at the profile of council advocates, as well as using the same question amongst staff and other external stakeholders to understand reputation more widely.

Question H: Council responsiveness

The consultation proposal

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

Respondents were generally positive about this question, and no significant issues were raised about the wording or response scales, therefore it has been **included as a third tier question in its current form.**

A small number of respondents stated that they would prefer to ask whether residents think they can **influence the council’s decisions.** However our question review revealed that respondents found this question difficult to answer and did not interpret it consistently. Research outlined in the technical report shows that the proposed question (question H) in conjunction with the extent to which residents feel informed (question F) and overall satisfaction with the local authority (question B) will give a more robust and informative picture of feelings of influence.

Question I: Trust in the local authority

The consultation proposal

How much do you trust [name of council]?

Whilst respondents were not universally positive about using this question, there was a high enough level of support to justify including it as a third tier question for use by those councils that do want to look at trust. There were no major comments about the question phrasing or response scale, so **the final guidance maintains the question in its current form.**

Several of the respondents that indicated that they wouldn’t use this question stated that they were unclear what was meant by the term ‘trust’ or why it was important. We consider trust in the local authority to be an important aspect of reputation which is likely to impact on issues such as democratic legitimacy and engaging with residents.

In terms of what the word 'trust' means, it is useful to look at the results of the cognitive testing carried out as part of the review to develop this question set. The testing indicated that respondents based their answers on criteria including: transparency and openness, 'whether they deliver what they say they will', upholding promises, responding to residents, reliability and any recollection of 'scandal'.

Question J: Community cohesion (ethnicity)

The consultation proposal

To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different ethnic backgrounds get on well together?

By getting on well together, we mean living alongside each other with respect.

Around half of respondents were positive about including this question in its current form. The most common concern amongst the remaining consultees was the inclusion of 'ethnic'. These consultees generally preferred the 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?"

However, as outlined in the technical report, we do not consider that this question phrasing is appropriate for benchmarking. The primary reason being that 'different backgrounds' will be interpreted according to local context, so in effect the question is asking different things in different areas.

We therefore suggest the 'ethnic backgrounds' version of the question for councils that specifically want to benchmark the ethnicity aspect of social cohesion. We recommend question K for authorities that wish to benchmark on community cohesion more generally.

Based on feedback from the consultation, we have **made one small change to the explanatory text which now reads:**

"By getting on well together, we mean treating each other with respect"

Question K: Community cohesion

The consultation proposal

To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in this local area pull together to improve the local area?

Consultees were generally positive about the phrasing and answer scale for this question, therefore **the final guidance maintains the question in its current form.**

A small number questioned the use of the phrase 'pull together', stating that they were unclear exactly what it means. However our cognitive testing found that the phrase 'pull together' was interpreted consistently by respondents (as 'team work' to

improve the surrounding area) and had clear resonance with collective action. Examples of collective action given by respondents who participated in the cognitive testing included resident's associations, voluntary work, projects to clean up park space, picking up litter, raising issues with the council and petitions.

Question L: Anti-social behaviour

The consultation proposal

Thinking about this local area, how much of a problem do you think each of the following are....

- 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

Overall, respondents were positive about including this as a third tier question, with no major comments about question wording or response scales. Therefore the final guidance retains this as a third tier question.

There were however a couple of points arising from the consultation and these are addressed below:

- **Other partners:** some respondents suggested that this information is already collected by the police in their area. In those situations, we would allow the authority to upload the police collected data as long as the relevant quality criteria have been met by the police. The relevant criteria for this question are the data quality guidance, local area definition and ordering requirements for this specific question.
- **Abandoned or burnt out cars** - several stated that this is no longer an issue of concern. Therefore this has been **removed from the list of behaviours**.
- **Teenagers hanging around on the street:** several respondents objected to singling out teenagers in this regard (both because it is stigmatising and also because it is not just a problem that can be caused by teenagers). Therefore this has been modified to **groups hanging around the streets**.⁵
- We are however aware that police may not want to add the 'groups hanging around the streets' option as this would disrupt their ASB7 index, therefore we **have made inclusion of 'groups hanging around the streets' optional**.
- **Additional behaviours:** A number of other behaviours were nominated for inclusion, but none consistently enough to add to the standard benchmarking list. If authorities wish to add their own local issues to the end of the list of

⁵ If councils still wish to include the 'teenagers' and abandoned cars options they will be able to do so – see the 'additional behaviours' bullet point.

behaviours, then the guidance will allow this. However, authorities should keep in mind that some people may skim the whole list of behaviours and then answer. This means that any additional anti social behaviours should be of a similar level of seriousness to those already on the list, otherwise they might make the existing behaviours seem comparatively less severe and influence respondents' answers.

Question ordering – second and third tier questions

The consultation proposal – second and third tier

The majority of second tier and third tier questions are less impacted by position effects; therefore their positioning within a questionnaire is not as critical as for the core set of questions.

However there are specific ordering requirements relating to each one, and these are outlined in the guidance.

Views on the question ordering requirements for the second tier and third tier questions were more positive than the core questions, reflecting the higher level of flexibility permitted. Where there were concerns, these echoed those expressed for the core questions. Again, we have decided to **keep the question ordering requirements for the second and third tier questions in place.**

As a result of consultation responses, the guidance will however make it clearer that authorities are free to use only those second and third tier questions that they want to include, and they don't have to be presented in the order they appear in the consultation document, as long as they meet the question ordering requirements. This could also include placing some of the second tier questions after the third tier questions (again, subject to the question ordering requirements of specific questions).

One change has been made to the question ordering requirements for **Question F: Informed about the council** as a result of feedback from the consultation. The guidance has been modified to state that this question should come as soon as possible after the core questions, as there is some evidence that certain types of question can impact responses to this one.

Further issues

Demographic questions

A small number of respondents asked for guidance on demographic monitoring questions. It is beyond the scope of this guidance to specify which demographic monitoring questions should be used. However, the guidance has been updated to clarify that any such questions should be included at the end of the survey rather than at the beginning. The only exception to this is where a quota approach is being used; in this case those questions that are specifically needed to establish the quotas can be included at the start.

Contextual information

Some consultees stated that it would be useful to expand the contextual information that authorities can upload to LG Inform. Examples of the sort of information that consultees were interested in included whether reminders, advance letters or press releases were used, whilst another asked for exact sample size and confidence intervals to be shown.

We will allow councils to add some brief 'further information' to the web upload form in addition to the information about seasonality. This will be submitted in the same box as seasonality information and will appear as 'hover text' when hovering over the results for particular authorities as well as in the background source information (in the 'notes' section). However, we will not require authorities to provide this information, for the following reasons:

- Requiring this information would increase the complexity and time required to complete the data upload process, which we are keen to keep as simple as possible.
- Variation in approaches such as the number of reminders is inevitable as a trade off for the benefits of allowing councils to fit these questions in with their own local arrangements. Attempting to control for every aspect of this will not be possible.

Quality checks

Some consultees requested clarification on the data quality checks and monitoring that LG Inform will carry out before accepting the data.

The final guidance document contains a series of check boxes to help councils ensure that they have met the necessary criteria for uploading their results to LG Inform to be used for benchmarking purposes.

Councils will complete an electronic form to upload their results to LG Inform, and at this point will be asked to confirm that each of the relevant criteria has been met. If the criteria have not been met, councils will not be able to upload their data. In addition, some basic data checks will be in place, for example, that data is being uploaded for the correct year and in the correct format, as well as flagging up outlier values.

The LGA will not be undertaking any more in depth auditing of data than this, however we will ask councils to provide a contact name to be used in the case of any queries about the data.

Service specific questions

The consultation asked respondents whether there were any other resident satisfaction questions which they would have liked or expected to see in the core benchmarking set. A number were mentioned, although not frequently enough to

justify their inclusion in the set. These included volunteering and the extent to which the local authority and police are successfully dealing with crime and anti social behaviour.

The most common request was for the inclusion of satisfaction with specific services. This is beyond the scope of the current exercise, however future work streams are being planned to look at this issue in more detail. It may be that these questions are added to the benchmarking set at a later date, and if this is the case care will be taken to ensure that this is done in a way which doesn't disrupt trends for the existing questions and complies with the existing question order criteria. In the meantime, councils are free to include service specific questions in their local surveys as they see fit.

The role of benchmarking

A small number of respondents expressed concern that some authorities might view this exercise as a simplistic 'league table'. Therefore **a new section has been added to the guidance on the role of benchmarking**. This new section highlights the following points:

- Benchmarking of these results should be seen as part of a wider approach to understanding and responding to local communities. Benchmarking provides context but is only one element of this approach, and helps raise lines of enquiry rather than providing answers.
- Councils should seek to include additional questions in their surveys that might help diagnose what is driving these results locally. For example, questions on what needs improving in the area might be of limited use for benchmarking but could usefully be included locally to identify areas for improvement.
- Rather than just comparing absolute levels of satisfaction, councils may also be interested in identifying and learning from authorities that have improved resident satisfaction over time, even if absolute levels of satisfaction are lower in those authorities.



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