

Place Survey

Summary

The place survey was carried out by all councils in autumn 2008. This report asks for members' views on the short term problems with publication of the survey data. It also recommends further discussions about the role of the place survey as part of the discussions about the information needs of councils (see part a)

Recommendations

- That the LGA seek members' views on a response to the overall results of the place survey and implications for the reputation of local government.
- That options for the future of the place survey be discussed with the small group of members recommended in part a of this report.

Actions

- LGA to meet again with the UK Statistics Authority and CLG and report back to members.
- That work is undertaken by LGA and IDeA to get a clear picture of the likely results of the survey and to ensure that there is a clear local government message on this.

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Place Survey

Background

1. The place survey was carried out for the first time in autumn 2008 and the intention is to repeat it every two years. It surveys residents' views of their area and local services. It replaces the BVPI satisfaction survey which was carried out by councils every three years (most recently autumn 2006). The survey supplies data for 18 of the national indicators.

Publication of data from the place survey 2008

2. All councils were required to carry out the place survey during autumn 2008. In two tier areas counties and districts often carried out the survey jointly. Results of the survey were submitted to the Audit Commission in January, who checked and weighted the data (to ensure it reflected the balance of different groups in the population) and sent it back to councils in February for verification. However, so far the full dataset with results from all councils has not been published.
3. The original date planned for the publication of place survey data was 9 March. Although Audit Commission collect and weight the data, they do so on behalf of CLG. CLG are ultimately responsible for publication of the results.
4. CLG have been interpreting the Statistics Act very strictly. This means that their view is that the place survey data cannot be generally released yet, until they have thoroughly reviewed the methodology as well as checked the data. So, although councils have data for their own area at the moment, they do not have it for other areas and therefore cannot easily make comparisons. CLG have not yet given a date for final publication.
5. While the LGA would agree that accurate, robust data is important, we feel it is not acceptable to introduce extra checks at the end of the process in an unplanned way. The delay is holding up data which is needed by councils and LSPs. The LGA met recently with the UK Statistics Authority to discuss CLG's interpretations of the Statistics Act and the Code of Practice. The UK Statistics Authority have provided some useful initial reactions to the issues, and the LGA is now setting up a further meeting to bring together CLG, UK Statistics Authority, Audit Commission and hopefully resolve the problem.

Publication of the place survey – reputation issues for local government

6. The survey results have yet to be released by CLG but information from Mori, who conducted the survey, suggests that satisfaction with councils has fallen from 52% to around 45%, the lowest national score yet. This fairly consistent

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across the board. Part of reason for decline may be the apparent fall in how well informed people feel –only 38% feel they are kept informed about local services. On a more positive note, the public now seem more positive about quality of life where they live – up from 75% to around 79%, suggesting perhaps that councils are failing to get credit for their work.

Longer term issues for the place survey

7. Requiring all councils to carry out a common survey, by post, at a particular time, means that councils are able to compare their data with other areas. However, there are some pitfalls with this process and problems with the current survey:
 - The survey asks very broad questions about the council, other services and the local area (eg “how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?”). This information can only be a starting point for councils and partnerships. They also need much more specific information from service users about how they experience services, they need to know why people feel the way they do about their area and they need to know how views differ between different social groups and neighbourhoods. It follows that comparisons between areas made on the basis of broad questions will always be imprecise.
 - Because this is a postal survey, some groups are less likely to complete it; for example, younger people, anyone who has difficulty with reading and writing, or some speakers of other languages. Some larger urban councils carry out their own face to face surveys for this reason and feel a postal survey does not meet their needs.
 - Part of the value of the survey comes from a finer analysis by different social groups such as age or ethnic background. Because the number of responses required for the place survey is small (1100 in each council area), and some groups may be under-represented, the value of this analysis is reduced.
 - Councils take different views on the value of benchmarking the place survey. To generalise, smaller councils tend to favour the place survey and rely on it heavily for feedback from communities. Large councils with a significant research function see the place survey as incidental to other, higher quality research work. This applies particularly if they are in diverse urban areas.
 - The place survey is a vehicle for the collection of 18 national indicators. Although the indicators are supposed to reflect priorities across the whole of government, in fact each of the indicators is “owned” by a particular government department. The survey suffers from being a

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compendium of issues that different departments feel are important eg anti-social behaviour, independent living for the elderly.

8. Given the issues outlined here the LGA has said in its feedback on the National Indicator Set and on CAA that the place survey is only a starting point for understanding residents' views. Results will only make sense when set alongside other local intelligence. They also need to be set in the context of an understanding of the social and economic makeup of the area.

Future options

9. At this point it would be valuable for LGA, and councils, to reflect on the value of a single, postal survey. Possible options for the future include:
 - Retaining a standard survey which would be cheapest done by post
 - Dropping the survey completely and releasing resources for more local Research
 - Carrying out a survey that allows for more local flexibility in the questions asked and methodology (eg face to face interviews) – but loses some comparability

It is recommended that these issues be considered alongside the options for a data and information function set out in part a of this report.

Financial Implications

10. None directly from this report but future support for councils may have resource implications.

Implications for Wales

11. The new performance framework including CAA, the National Indicator Set and the place survey applies to England only. Issues concerning the wider data and information needs of councils and areas are generally applicable to local government.