

Resident Satisfaction Questions: LGA Consultation

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report provides an update on the recent consultation carried out by the Research and Information Team on the development of a set of questions and accompanying guidance that the sector can use to collect some broadly comparable data on resident satisfaction.

Recommendations

1. That a final set of questions and guidance is published.
2. That the Board consider whether or not to allow residents panels to be uploaded to LG Inform for comparison at this stage.

Action

The Research and Information Team will take this work forward in light of the Board's views on the issues raised in this paper.

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Background

1. When the Place Survey was abolished, with it went any comparable information about resident satisfaction (and other resident perceptions). With the development of LG Inform councils told us that the lack of up to date resident satisfaction information was a key gap. This is on the basis that understanding resident or customer views and being able to make comparisons with other areas is a key element of assessing the effectiveness of an authority, alongside cost and performance information.
2. The LGA commissioned some research from Ipsos MORI to look at whether a set of questions might be developed that councils can use locally in their own residents surveys on a voluntary basis, which would be of a good enough quality for comparisons between them to be made.
3. Ipsos MORI conducted reviews of questions still being used by the sector and of research literature about what works, conducted interviews with leaders and chief executives about their expectations and views of such questions, and tested a series of questions with members of the public.

Consultation

4. Over the course of March and April 2012 we conducted a consultation which sought the views of councils on the proposed set of questions and guidance. There was a very high level of interest, with the consultation generating detailed responses from over 120 councils.
5. Consultees were generally very positive about the need to be able to benchmark resident satisfaction and supportive of the approach suggested. Several specific comments emerged around the question wording and guidance, and a number of changes have been made on the basis of this.

The questions and guidance

6. On the basis of the Ipsos MORI review, the Research and Information Team is recommending a set of questions and associated guidance on how to use them. The aim is **not** to introduce a new sector survey: but simply to recommend a set of questions that can be used on a voluntary basis by local authorities that, if they follow the guidance, will produce results that will be broadly comparable for benchmarking purposes.

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7. The proposed approach is a flexible one, designed to suit local circumstances and minimise the cost to councils of collecting the data by allowing them to use only those questions that are of interest locally, and fit these questions 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.
8. The guidance includes requirements for elements such as:
 - 8.1 the question wording;
 - 8.2 where in the questionnaire the questions are included;
 - 8.3 the order of questions; and
 - 8.4 the method (postal, online, telephone or face to face) that is used to conduct the survey.
9. In order for the data to be comparable across a range of different surveys in different authorities, it will be necessary that the guidance is followed – this may mean that councils will need to compromise on the questions they are asking in relation to how they have done this before. But it will be essential this guidance is followed if we want the data to be of a good enough quality for comparison.
Authorities can, of course, continue what they have been doing; it will simply mean that they won't be able to compare their results with others, via LG Inform.

Key issues

10. We now seek guidance from the Improvement Board on the next steps for this work.
11. We recommend moving ahead with publishing the final set of questions and guidance. Following the guidance will be completely voluntary – it is there to help councils derive more value from data that they collect, rather than impose any extra unwanted burden. Further, there has been a lot of interest from the sector; we are receiving frequent enquiries about the progress of the work.
12. However, there are two key issues that the Board might want to consider, and these are outlined below.

Issue 1 - levels of participation

13. Consultees emphasised that the success and value of benchmarking will depend on how many authorities participate.

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14. However, not all councils will participate and it will take some time to build up a bank of results. If this is not communicated effectively, there is a risk that some councils will incur costs by changing their local survey arrangements, or compromise local trends by changing question wording in order to participate. If many other councils of the type against which they want to compare do not participate, then they will have little or no comparison, and it is possible that initially a council in this situation might not see benefits that outweigh the costs they have incurred. These costs are unlikely to be financial, but rather inconvenience and a loss of trend data.
15. We propose taking the following steps to manage this risk:
- 15.1 This is a new approach and we will need to be clear with authorities that it will take some time to build up a critical mass of participating authorities.
 - 15.2 We will encourage councils to liaise with other councils that they may want to compare themselves to, to coordinate survey activity and possibly even achieve economies of scale through joint commissioning. We are aware of one regional group that has already started this process.
 - 15.3 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 those authorities that aren't linked in can find a group that might be of relevance.

Issue 2 - residents panels

16. Currently the guidance does not permit authorities to benchmark data collected via residents panels. A residents panel is a group of residents that volunteer or agree to be surveyed by the authority on a recurring basis - either regularly or ad hoc. Many authorities use these panels as they are cheaper than running random sample surveys by telephone, post or face to face.
17. Several authorities stated that they will not be able to move away from their residents panels as they would not be able to afford this. They did however argue for LG Inform to include a separate category whereby those conducting panel surveys could benchmark their results to other panel survey results.
18. The argument against this, and the reason we originally recommended excluding panels, is that there is strong evidence to suggest a considerable response bias among panel members, which makes these results incomparable to general population data and to other panels. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, because they are often not randomly selected, they are not statistically representative. This means that it would be difficult to distinguish whether any

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differences in results are real or related to respondent selection. Second, 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.

19. 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 resident 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.
20. Nonetheless, these authorities are still keen to have some context by seeing the results of other panels. We 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 want.
21. One compromise would be to specify a set of quality criteria that a panel would have to meet in order to be included. These criteria might address the way participants are recruited, the number of active participants, and the frequency with which they are then contacted. However, from what we know about the range of ways in which panels are currently operated, the probability is that many councils would still not meet these criteria and not be able to participate. Further, it may be counter productive to let authorities compare when the likelihood is that the differences in results will be influenced by panel selection and management rather than any genuine differences in residents' views.
22. **Our recommendation is not to allow residents panels to be uploaded to LG Inform for comparison at this stage. However, the views of the Improvement Board would be appreciated on this issue.**

Next steps

23. If the Board agrees, we would publish the final questions and guidance by early September 2012 so that authorities can start using them, with a view to inputting their results into LG Inform in the autumn (when our ability to collect local data will come on stream).
24. Alongside this, we would publish a consultation response document, which 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.

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London Councils

25. Part of the research that supports this work was funded by London Councils, as the set includes some questions on perceptions of crime and cohesion that they identified would be of particular interest to their members – and other metropolitan authorities agreed would also be useful to them. The final question set and guidance will therefore be jointly badged by the LGA and London Councils, subject to agreement from their Self Improvement Board.