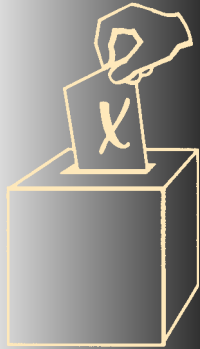




Service Quality



Participation



Finance



Management



Structure

LOCAL AND REGIONAL
GOVERNMENT RESEARCH
PROGRAMME



Research Summary

THE BEACON COUNCIL SCHEME 2000/2001: A Handbook on Measurements of User Satisfaction in Local Government Service Delivery



Overview

This research paper was produced as part of the Beacon Council Scheme 2000/2001 in order to assess and benchmark local authorities measurements of public satisfaction with public services. As such, this paper:

- provides clear criteria for the gathering and using of research material to inform levels of public satisfaction, and
- establishes baseline levels of public satisfaction for seven aspects of local authorities' general performance, and in relation to the specific Beacon Scheme year 2 themes.

Consequently, this research paper may be helpful to local authorities in providing guidelines in designing and undertaking successful, meaningful and useful research. Moreover, the baseline data constructed will be of use in providing a benchmark of public satisfaction scores, against which a local authority can assess their own satisfaction ratings and place these in a national, regional, or local authority type context.

The Beacon Council Scheme

As part of its modernisation agenda, the Government introduced the Beacon Council Scheme to promote best practice and innovation in local government across a range of services. The rationale of the Beacon Scheme is for local authorities to demonstrate and exchange learning and good practice to improve performance, aiming to "identify areas of excellence in local government from which other councils can learn". As such, councils selected for beacon status spread and share their practices through a series of roadshows, open days and other activities in beacon authorities, co-ordinated by the IDeA.

In the first year of the scheme, councils were appointed as beacons in seven themes, ranging from 'dealing with waste' to 'helping care leavers'. In the second year, the number of themes was increased to eleven:

- Accessible Services
- Competitiveness and Enterprise
- Foster Care
- Independent Living for Older People
- Local Health Strategies
- Maintaining a Quality Environment
- Raising Attainment in Education
- Regeneration through Culture, Sport and Tourism
- Tackling Vehicle Crime
- Tackling Youth Drug Misuse
- Town Centre Regeneration

Beacon councils are identified as being 'good' in their general functioning as a local

authority and 'excellent' in the particular service or cross-cutting area for which beacon status is awarded. Ministers, on the advice of an Independent Advisory Panel, grant beacon status for local authorities achieving excellence and maintaining consistently high standards, as well as by achieving rapid improvements in service delivery.

Applications therefore had to cover both individual service and general performance. Improvement in services which matter to the public is a central purpose of the Beacon Scheme. In the second round, applicant councils were invited to show evidence that they had taken steps to evaluate user satisfaction. They were asked to provide a copy of one relevant piece of research in relation to the theme, and one in relation to general performance carried out since July 1997. Application guidelines suggested authorities include technical details, information on how the research had been used to improve services, and feedback provided to the public. This was considered an important part of assessing whether a council could demonstrate good overall performance to the satisfaction of the Advisory Panel.

Levels of satisfactions with councils overall - and with individual services - vary widely and as yet, there is no nationally comparative BVPI dataset with which to evaluate a local authority's performance in this area. Consequently, it was important that there are some established criteria from which levels of satisfaction with services can be assessed.

Research papers

The Local and Regional Government Research Unit commissioned MORI to prepare two briefing papers in order to inform the evaluation of applicant councils' approaches to measuring and utilising public satisfaction data. These briefing papers;

- identified the criteria that need to be considered in assessing a local authority's approach to establishing levels of satisfaction amongst its citizens with the services it provides and incorporating the results into more effective service delivery. Templates were developed from these criteria which were used to evaluate research projects presented in the individual applications for beacon status.
- established baseline data of public satisfaction within each of the 11 beacon themes and for local government as a whole.

Using the evaluation templates developed in these papers, the researchers prepared a short report for each

piece of research, including an assessment of the findings against the national baseline data - where this was available - that was used by the Advisory Panel to inform their recommendations to Ministers.

These briefing papers, establishing the criteria for evaluating approaches and developing the baseline data - including an appendix of the data used to establish the baselines - are available free to download on the DETR Local and Regional Government Research Unit website at

<http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/research/index.htm> or in hard copy form (see the end of the summary). A brief summary of the papers is provided below.

Section one: Evaluation criteria for assessing public satisfaction research

This section of the report is divided into two parts:

- **Part One** describing the templates that were developed to assess the research conducted by individual applicants. It includes details of the guidance prepared for the Beacon Council Advisory Panel, including the methodology used in making the evaluations.
- **Part Two** setting out the key criteria that need to be considered in evaluating local authority research. These were intended to assist the Advisory Panel in the selection process, by setting out guidance on best practice in local government research. This section moreover, provides useful pointers on how to integrate research into the wider local authority administrative systems.

Nine criteria were identified as necessary for successful research, divided into three key stages of the research process:

HOW THE PROJECT WAS DEVELOPED

Criterion 1 A clear need to conduct the research, with achievable objectives.

Criterion 2 Links in with other research and consultation initiatives.

Criterion 3 Learns from past experience.

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

Criterion 4 The approach developed enables aims and objectives to be realised.

Criterion 5 Research is relevant and sensitive to needs of target audience.

Criterion 6 Conducted objectively, and to high standards.

USING RESEARCH TO DEVELOP THE SERVICE

Criterion 7 Clear and actionable conclusions, supported by the findings.

Criterion 8 Results and implications have been communicated effectively.

Criterion 9 The research has made a real contribution towards the development of the service.

Section two: Baseline data on public satisfaction

On the performance of local authorities as a whole and on all of the eleven themes, there is a mass of qualitative and quantitative data available from research among the general public, service users and a variety of stakeholder groups. However, due to the nature of some of the general performance measures and some of the specific theme areas – and the variety of question wording and structures for measuring attitudes – used in researching particular areas – it was difficult to construct some national baseline data in some areas. The lack of a reliable baseline however, does not negate the importance of research that has been carried out by local authorities, nor the contribution that it makes to ensuring the development of the delivery of the service. The following sections summarise the key messages and patterns that seem to emerge from the data.

GENERAL PERFORMANCE

In terms of general performance, seven performance measures were established.

- *Satisfaction with how a council is running things/the area.* The baseline data suggests that satisfaction with local government generally has fallen slightly over recent years with the difference between people who are very, or fairly satisfied, and people who are very, or fairly dissatisfied falling from 35% in 1998 to 27% in 2000. The data show that single-tier authorities tend to be less well rated than two-tier authorities, although evidence suggested that those in higher socio-economic grades (who live in two-tier areas) typically rate their authority more highly than others.
- *Value for money.* Although it is noted that many people are unaware of the financial constraints under which local authorities operate, it is recognised that there is a strong link between perceptions of local authorities' financial management and overall satisfaction with how it is running things/the area. The baseline indicates that approximately a third of people think that their authority provides good or very good value for money and again, two-tier authorities tend to be rated better than single-tier authorities.
- *Overall quality of services.* Although it is acknowledged that respondents may attribute specific services to local authorities when making an overall judgement on an authority's quality of services, generally, about 60% of people thought that their council provided good quality services overall. Again, there is a notable variation by authority type with two-tier authorities tending to be better rated.
- *Satisfaction with complaints handling.* Although the definition of a 'complainant' and the outcome of the complaint is important to this measurement, data suggests that there is a relatively consistent 40-45% of people very dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaint, whether they have phoned in to report a problem, or have made an actual formal complaint.
- *How well informed residents feel they are kept.* As with value for money, how well residents feel they are kept informed by their council is a key driver in assessing overall satisfaction with a local authority. Typically, about 40-55% of people feel fairly, or very well informed by their council about the services and benefits it provides. County and metropolitan councils were considered the most satisfactory in keeping their residents informed.

- *How residents have been consulted.* Consultation is a key requirement of the modernising agenda for local authorities, although measuring public satisfaction with consultation is a problematic area. Many studies show residents who are dissatisfied with their authority's current performance are more likely to seek greater involvement in what their authority does. A high proportion of residents who want further involvement may therefore, be as much a reflection of perceived poor service provision as an authority's success in revitalising local government and developing a two-way relationship with the community. Over half the residents in London boroughs were said to have been consulted in the year 1997-98, although more generally, the overall proportion of residents being consulted is about a third.
- *Community leadership.* Generally, previous research shows that the majority of the public are not interested in local politics. Voter turnout in local elections is low and sizeable proportions of the public feel their council is out of touch with them, too remote and impersonal and rarely takes local residents' views into account. However, of measures aimed directly to make voting more accessible – such as having polling stations in supermarkets and them being open for more than one day – there are a number which it is suggested could increase voter turnout on election days.

computer to get information, apply for benefits, order licenses etc.

- *Competitiveness and Enterprise.* Because of the difficulty of collecting data to cover the entirety of this theme, national baseline data are provided on public satisfaction with councils' role in supporting the economy and local businesses, and in environmental health. In terms of consumer protection, baseline data shows that approximately two-thirds of people are very, or fairly satisfied with their council's measures for hygiene in shops and restaurants. However, only about a third of people were either very, or fairly satisfied with their council's efforts to attract business into the area, and only a third thought their council either very, or fairly successful in supporting the local economy and creating local jobs.
- *Foster Care.* In improving standards for looked after children, almost a third of children said that more information would have made coming into care easier for them. The majority of children in foster care said that they saw their families as often as they liked, although 33% of children in foster care and 42% of children in children's homes said they would like to see them more. In terms of support for looked after children, a consistent majority of children said that they always had someone to talk to about their concerns (63% in foster care, 47% in residential homes and 50% in secure units).
- *Independent Living for Older People.* There is no open-ended 'quality of life for older people' baseline available, although this kind of information may be implicit in individual authority's own surveys. Data suggest that older people's priorities do not differ significantly from that of the younger generations, with people considering the most important improvement for their local area being more and cheaper bus services (16+, 15%; 55-64, 15%; 65+, 17%). In terms of specific services for older people however, around 66% of residents and service users tended to be satisfied with care for the elderly, residential homes, home-helps and meals-on-wheels.
- *Local Health Strategies.* Again this is a very wide-ranging theme with strategies encompassing a variety of issues and a number of partnerships. It would be nearly impossible to construct a baseline covering all of these aspects although data collected show that the most salient issues for the public in improving the country's health

Year 2 Themes

This part of the report details national baselines with each of the eleven themes – where available – and includes a discussion of some of the issues that arose from the trawl of the available data.

- *Accessible Services* This wide-ranging theme incorporates a number of issues and considerations. The data show that almost three-quarters of people prefer to contact the local authority by phone, and of suggested improvements to telephone queries, the helpfulness of the person answering was considered the most important (86%, very important). National data on the ratings of front-line staff show that about 60-65% of people felt that they were efficient, easy – and quick – to get hold of, and able to deal with the enquiry. In terms of alternative access to local authorities, one in four households now have access to the internet and 37% of people would use a

are access to health services, poverty, air pollution, education and unemployment. In terms of specific service provision however, about 86% of people tended to be satisfied with their GPs whilst a slightly smaller proportion of people were satisfied with hospitals (79%) and local health services (77%).

- *Maintaining a Quality Environment.* This theme incorporates a lot of services for which local authorities have responsibility. Perhaps an indirect measure of people's perception of the quality of their local environment is how they gauge the seriousness of specific issues such as vandalism, graffiti, litter and dogs which have all declined since 1992. In relation to satisfaction with specific local authority services however, about 69% of people were satisfied with the level of street cleaning in their area. 40% of people were typically satisfied with the level of road/pavement maintenance, and this varied from 35% for metropolitan councils to 49% for London boroughs. Similarly, satisfaction with recycling was about 82% overall – ranging from 71% for London boroughs to 85% for district councils.
- *Raising Attainment in Education.* Although, there is a wealth of survey data available on residents' and parents' overall satisfaction with key elements of the education service – nursery, primary and secondary provision – there is no national baseline data specifically on the theme focus of underachieving groups. This theme does not lend itself to quantitative research although it is likely that LEAs may have carried out smaller-scale qualitative research. However, the sensitivity of the data may limit its availability.
- *Regenerating through Culture, Sport and Tourism.* Given the individual and specific nature of improvements to cultural facilities, the report concentrates in this theme on levels of satisfaction with different cultural activities. It is important to note that surveys would vary according to whether specific users of the facility are targeted or responses are gained from more generally focussed research. Satisfaction with libraries tended to be the greatest – approximately 80-90% satisfied (although only 72% in London Boroughs). There was a large disparity with levels of satisfaction with swimming pools with 77% of people being satisfied with their swimming pool in Metropolitan councils, compared to 66% in Unitary councils. However, the baseline shows that satisfaction with facilities generally – leisure

centres, sports facilities, swimming pools, museums, art galleries, libraries and parks – tended to range from about 60% upwards.

- *Tackling Vehicle Crime.* The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that both fear of car-related crime and the number of crimes committed have decreased over the last fifteen years. The recently published 2000 BCS shows that vehicle-related thefts have decreased by 15% from 1997 to 1999, while concern about crime has remained stable. In terms of fear of crime however, there are some notable differences by region with the most striking difference being that people living in inner cities are both more worried and more likely to have been a victim. Younger people are also more concerned about car related crimes.
- *Tackling Youth Drug Misuse.* There are a number of national baselines on reported usage of drugs amongst children and young people. However, no baseline *per se* could be constructed on actual public satisfaction with the services provided. Individual authorities may have quantitative survey data among the local community as a whole to gauge how much of a problem drug use is perceived to be. Councils may also have carried out quantitative survey research among young people and/or school-children to gauge usage and attitudes, perhaps as part of the Schools Health Education Unit's study. Research among other stakeholder groups such as health professionals, schools, voluntary groups and drug users would more likely take the form of small-scale qualitative research.
- *Town Centre Regeneration.* Baseline data is difficult to construct because of the diversity of town/city centres and the general public's limited understanding of town/city centre management, control and development. However, it would be expected that local authorities had used a range of consultative techniques to elicit and gather the views of residents, visitors and traders.

Further information

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Copies of 'A Handbook on Measurements of User Satisfaction in Local Government Service Delivery' will be available from April 2001 from:
DETR Publications Sales Centre
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