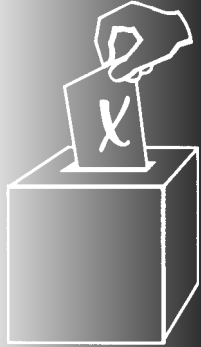




Service Quality



Participation



Finance



Management



Structure

LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PROGRAMME



Research Summary

Revisiting Public Perceptions of Local Government: A Decade of Change?

Introduction and Background

In July 1998 the government published its White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (DETR, 1998a), in which it set out a strategy for the reform of local government. Increasing citizen participation in the decisions made by local councils was an integral feature of the White Paper, and in particular emphasis was laid on the need for the financial aspects of local government to be more transparent, responsive, effective and accountable. For this to be achieved requires an active and informed electorate on the one hand, and open, flexible and outward-looking local authorities on the other.

The survey therefore sought to measure the extent to which people in England are actively engaged in, and informed about, local government. Respondents were asked questions to tap their basic knowledge and understanding of issues such as their local council's name and political control, what services are provided by local government, and how councils are financed. In addition a range of questions tapped satisfaction with services and the information provided by councils on general issues and finance in particular. Finally, attitudes towards the role of public consultation were explored by asking about people's experiences of, and willingness to take part in, a range of participation initiatives, and local decision making in general.

The Survey

A random sample of the English population (aged 18 and over) took part in the survey. 2,074 face-to-face interviews were conducted in March and April, 1999. The overall response rate was 65%. Weighting was used to correct for selection and response biases and all figures in the report are based on weighted data. The questionnaire was designed by researchers at the *National Centre* in consultation with the DETR and an Advisory Panel whose members were drawn from the DETR, and representatives from local government, and the voluntary sector with an interest in the overall aims of the research. This study builds on work conducted by the *National Centre* in 1990, commissioned by the Department of the Environment.

A parallel research study was carried out by the *National Centre* to provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of approaches to budget consultation and communication. The results are published in: *"It is our money anyway..." Lessons learnt from giving the public a voice in local authority spending decisions.* DETR 2000.

Local Government Knowledge

Respondents' knowledge of their local council name was quite high (74%), but slightly lower than in 1990 (78%). A similar

proportion (75%) could name their county council. Knowledge was highest in the London Boroughs and lowest in the new unitary authorities created in the 1990s, which suggests that reorganisation accounts for much of the decrease in knowledge since 1990.

More men knew the name of their local council (79%) than women did (71%). And only 55% of people aged 18-24 could name their local council, compared to 80% of those aged over 60.

Most could name the party controlling their local council (53%), but only 26% were able to name the party controlling their *county* council. This was lower than in 1990, when 38% could name the party controlling the *county* council. People living in two-tier areas were three times as likely to get the name of the party controlling their local council wrong (32%) as people living in one-tier areas (11%).

In single tier authorities, 90% recognised street cleaning, rubbish collection, libraries, road and pavement maintenance, home helps and schools as local council services. Most in two-tier authorities also recognised these as council services, but there was some confusion about whether the district or county council was the provider. In one-tier areas people consistently mis-identified schools as being provided by central government. One in four people (23%) in one-tier authorities thought that hospitals were provided by their local council, and half (49%) of those in two-tier areas thought that either the district or county council provided hospitals.

Knowledge of, and attitudes towards, local government finance

People were evenly split about whether their council tax was good value for money: a third thought it was, a third said it was not and the remainder said it was neither good nor bad value.

Many people perceived councils to have a large role in local financial decision making, and a majority thought this *should* be the case. 39% said councils have all or a large say in deciding levels of council tax, and 64% said that councils *should* have the final say in deciding council tax. Previous surveys going back to 1983 have found that supporters of the three main political parties differed considerably in their

attitudes to whether councils should have the final say in deciding council tax levels, but this was no longer the case in 1999.

Only 23% correctly identified central government as having all or a large say in deciding Business Rates, with people over 60 most likely to think that local councils decide Business Rates on their own. Again a majority (64%) said local councils *should* have the final say in deciding this.

A majority (76%) said councils should own local schools rather than rent the premises. Fewer – though still a majority – said the same about care homes for elderly people (57%), car parks (56%), and leisure centres (55%).

Public understanding of the relationship between local taxes and service delivery

There was only minority support for increased spending and taxation on the seven service areas respondents were asked about (schools, police, services for the elderly, services for children, street cleaning and refuse collection, housing, and leisure services). People's support for increased spending on services was affected by a number of factors including whether they or someone in their household directly benefited from that service. For many respondents, support for increased spending on a service was related to how satisfied they were with that service's local performance. This perhaps indicates that respondents perceive a strong relationship between increases in expenditure and improvements in quality.

Personal contact with, and information received from, local councils

Nearly half of respondents said they had contacted the council about a problem or with an enquiry in the past year. Of these, 20% had contacted the council about their council tax. Of those with specific council tax queries 69% found the staff helpful during their enquiry, 70% found it easy to get hold of the right person and 62% were very or fairly satisfied with the outcome.

68% of respondents said they had received an explanatory leaflet with their council tax bill. However, only 15% had actually read it. Fewer respondents had received a newspaper from their local council (58%) but more (27%) said they read it every time it was delivered. Only 5% of people said they had picked up a leaflet about council finance in the past two years.

A majority of people (58%) felt that their local council kept them very or fairly well informed about the services it provides, but only 39% could say the same about financial matters. People living in two-tier areas felt that their county councils did not keep them well informed about local services (27%) or finance (20%). Those aged 18-24 were most critical of the amount of information available to them.

Respondents were also asked to say if they thought their council distributed enough information about its finances. Overall, one in five (18%) said they had not seen *any* information about their local council's finances. People were most likely to say this if they lived in an area with a unitary authority (22% compared to 16% who said this of their district council). 42% said there wasn't enough financial information – and 50% of people in London boroughs said this. Just over a third thought there was about the right amount of information (37%). Although people in two-tier areas were most likely to be satisfied with the amount of information available about their district council, they also felt that their county council did not produce enough information about its finances. Only 20% said there was enough while 40% said they had not seen *any* information about their county council's finances – more than twice as many as the 16% who said this about their district council.

Satisfaction with local councils

Most thought that their local council was well run (57%), but this varied according to the council type. District councils were most likely to be rated as well run (63%), whereas only 48% said this of unitary authorities. A large majority (72%) were, however, satisfied or very satisfied with the way their local council runs things. Again there were important variations in satisfaction. People who had lived in the neighbourhood for more than 15 years and people with no qualifications were the least satisfied.

In 1990 the proportion saying they were satisfied with how their local council runs things was slightly higher (78%).

The trend, outlined previously of people in two-tier areas being more positive about their local council than their county is not as strong when looking at satisfaction levels. 56% thought their county council was well run (compared to 63% who said this of their local council). And again, a majority (74%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the way their county council runs things (72% said this of their local council).

There was also a high level of satisfaction with specific council services. 91% were satisfied or very satisfied with public libraries and 87% with refuse collection. However satisfaction with local road maintenance (41%) and street cleaning (66%) was notably lower. People in London boroughs were least satisfied with local schools.

Political Interest, media exposure and community activism

People's involvement in their local community, as measured by interest in local politics, exposure to local media and membership of local groups were all found to be related to their propensity to vote in local elections.

Interest in local politics was not very high – 32% said they had a great deal or a fair amount of interest, but interest was higher than in 1990, when 27% said this. Those with most interest in local politics were over 45 (35-38%), in professional or managerial occupations (38%), with degree level education (39%), and lived in London boroughs (38%) – all of which are of course highly related.

- 79% of those with a great deal or a fair amount of interest in local politics said they had voted in the most recent local election compared to 62% of those who were not a member.

Very high proportions watch local TV news regularly (85%), read a local paper (75%) and listen to local radio news programmes (47%) – 34% said they did all three.

- 73% of people who said they did all three said they had voted in the most recent local election compared to 42% who had no local media exposure.

Overall, 28% said they were a member of a local community group. Women (30%), Conservative party (34%) and Liberal Democrat (34%) party supporters, those aged 45-59 (37%) and those who had lived in their local area for more than ten years (31%-33%) were more likely to be members of at least one local group. In addition, twice as many of those in professional/managerial occupations (40%) were members of a local group compared to those in unskilled or unclassifiable occupations (19%).

- 79% of people who were a member of a local community group said they had voted in the most recent local election compared to 62% of people who were not a member.
- 76% of people who said they were satisfied with their local council said they had voted in the most recent local election compared to 66% of people who were dissatisfied.

Participation in consultation exercises

Respondents were asked about their experience of the range of consultation initiatives increasingly widespread in local government. 70% said their council had not used any of the things mentioned to ask for their views in the previous year. Only two methods – public meetings (11%) and postal questionnaires (10%) – were mentioned by one in ten respondents or more.

Those aged 18-24 (80%) were most likely to say they had not been consulted in any way, compared to 67% of those aged 45-59, and 72% of those over 60. Additionally, only 3% of those who said they had been to a public meeting were aged 18-24. Gender differences were also noticeable; more men (73%) said they had not been asked for their views in some way than women (67%).

People were eager to be more involved, however. 55% said they would definitely be interested in being more involved in the decisions their council makes, with 16% saying it would depend on the issue. The most common reason given for not wanting to be involved was not having spare time (29%), though worryingly 11% gave the *unprompted* answer to the effect that they could not be more involved due to barriers such as disability or language.

People were most interested in postal questionnaires (47%) and face-to-face interviews at home (30%), although 23% said they were interested in attending public meetings. To ensure consultation exercises are as inclusive as possible councils will need to target specific groups who say they are not interested in being more involved. These groups include: those over 60, people with no qualifications, and employees in non-professional occupations.

Looking at consultation about finance specifically, 45% said they would be interested in taking part in an important decision about their council's budget, and 14% said it would depend on the issue. The same groups who were least interested in consultation in general were again the least interested in financial issues, but in addition women and households who do not pay council tax were also less interested.

There seems to be support for the principle of wider consultation about financial issues, and a willingness to trust quite radical initiatives. 60% said they would trust a referendum of local people to come to the best decision about increasing the council tax always or most of the time, compared with only 30% who said they would trust local councillors.

Further Information

"Revisiting Public Perceptions of Local Government: A decade of change?" by Catherine Bromley (National Centre for Social Research), Nina Stratford (National Centre for Social Research) and Nirmala Rao (Goldsmiths' College), priced at £20, is available from:

Department of the Environment,
Transport and the Regions
Publications Sales Centre
Unit 21, Goldthorpe Industrial Estate
Goldthorpe, Rotherham S63 9BL
Tel: 01709 891318
Fax: 01709 881673

For further information on the research contract:

Natalia I. Chivite-Matthews
Local and Regional Government Research Unit
Department of the Environment, Transport and the
Regions
Eland House, Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU
Tel: 020 7944 4026
Fax: 020 7944 4099
e-mail: natalia_chivite-matthews@detr.gsi.gov.uk