



*Best Value User Satisfaction
2006-07: Consultation*

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Proposed changes to the General Survey

Additional questions

The General Survey questionnaire contains all the questions asked in the General Survey in 2003/04. However, it is proposed that the following changes should be made:

- add additional questions covering information provision, customer contact and care, local decision-making and how the council performs overall; and
- amend the order in which questions are asked.

The additional questions are being proposed because:

- analysis of the 2003/04 survey data clearly indicates that information provision, customer care and value-for-money considerations are important drivers of public attitudes towards councils;
- these types of questions are not only useful for benchmarking performance with other authorities but yield data that can be more specifically actionable at the local level;
- after the 2003/04 surveys many local authorities indicated to ODPM that they wanted questions to be included on these types of issues;

All of the questions have been considered with a number of organisations including the Audit Commission, the LGA, other Government Departments and the Office for Public Services Reform.

A full list of the additional questions proposed are overleaf.

survey questionnaire:

Question No.	Proposed Question
Q4	Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?
Q21	How well informed do you feel about each of the following? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to pay bills to the Council • How and where to register to vote • How you can get involved in local decision making • How to complain to the Council • What the Council spends its money on • What standard of service you should expect from the Council • Whether the Council is delivering on its promises • How well the Council is performing
Q22	How do you find out about your local Council? Please tick the MAIN source you use from the list below: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local media (newspapers, television, radio) • Information provided by the Council (newspaper/magazine, leaflets, posters) • Council website/Internet • From local Councillor • Direct contact with the Council • Word of mouth (e.g. family or friends) • Other source • None of the above • Don't know
Q27	How many times have you contacted the Council in the past twelve months for any other reason than to make a complaint? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have not contacted them in past 12 months • Once • Twice • Three times • Four times • Five or more times • Don't know/can't remember
Q28	Which of these describes the reasons why you made contact? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported an issue or problem • Asked for advice/information • Applied to use a service • Don't know/can't remember • Any other reason
Q29	Which department did you contact?
Q30	How were you in contact with the Council? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In person • By telephone • By e-mail • Via a website/Internet • By letter • Other method
Q31	Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received the last time you made contact with the Council?

Question No.	Proposed Question
Q32	<p>Still thinking about your most recent contact with the Council, please indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied you were with each aspect of the service you received. If any aspect does not apply to your particular experience, please tick not applicable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How easy it was to find the right person to deal with • The length of time it took to deal with the person you contacted • Any information you were given • How competent the staff were • How helpful the staff were • The final outcome
Q33	<p>Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making provided by your Council?</p>
Q34	<p>Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?</p>
Q35	<p>Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions your Council make(s) that affect your local area?</p>
Q36	<p>Here are some things that other people have said about their Council. To what extent do you think that these statements apply to your local Council?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is making the local area a better place to live • Is working to make the area safer • Is working to make the area cleaner and greener • Has improved town centres in the local area • Is efficient and well run • Provides good value for money • Spends its money wisely • Is trustworthy • Is remote and impersonal • Involves residents when making decisions • Promotes the interests of local residents • Listens to the concerns of local residents • Acts on the concerns of local residents • Works well with other agencies to provide services • Treats all type of people fairly • Keeps its promises • Does enough for people like me

A full draft version of the General Survey questionnaire is attached at Annex A. It is subject to change and is **not** the final version of the questionnaire.

The maximum proposed length of the questionnaire is 12-14 pages. If it were any longer there would probably be an adverse effect on the response rate. Therefore it will be necessary to reduce the number of questions in the questionnaire.

The Government welcomes comments on the new additional questions and views on which, if any, of the existing questions should be deleted.

The Government proposes altering the positioning of some questions and the description of local authority services within the questionnaire to ensure a more intuitive and better structure to questions. The proposed changes are:

- The description of local authority services is provided to respondents at the start of the section about local services, rather than in the middle of questions.
- All questions on local services have been combined into one section.
- Similarly, views on various aspects of the quality of life in the local area were asked at different points within the 2003/04 General Survey questionnaire and these would be better brought together in one place.
- The question used to calculate BV3 – “taking everything into account, how satisfied are you with the way the authority runs things?” – (Q20) has been moved to the end of Section 2.

The Government welcomes comments on the order of the questions.

2.2 A joint County and District Council General Survey questionnaire

During the 2003/04 surveys, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister worked with Dorset County Council¹ and the District Councils within its boundaries² to pilot a combined County and District Council General Household Survey questionnaire. The combined Survey was piloted alongside the separate questionnaire Surveys to trial its impact on user satisfaction data³.

The aim of the pilot exercise was to explore whether a joint questionnaire could be designed which would produce comparable data with separate questionnaires, without significantly reducing the response rate.

The broader aims of the pilot were: to achieve economies of scale and joint procurement in operating the General Survey across Counties and Districts; to increase the sample size for analysis and the potential relevance of data for community planning; to reduce consultation fatigue; to simplify logistics and reduce time taken over the survey; and, to enhance joint working and partnership between Counties and Districts.

1 The surveys were undertaken by The Market Research Group at Bournemouth University.

2 Christchurch Borough Council, East Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council, Purbeck District Council, West Dorset District Council and Weymouth & Portland Borough Council.

3 Dorset County Council and the District Councils undertook the 2003/04 General Survey as individual authorities (with separate samples from the joint survey sample), which served as a 'control' for the pilot as well as providing the statutory BVPI data.

... the 2003/04 General Survey questionnaire is. Does not seem successful in that

- it had no significant impact on the response rate (the individual survey achieved an average response of 51% compared with 47% for the joint survey);
- it achieved results for the vast majority of the user satisfaction BVPIs at a similar confidence level (within +/- 3%) to those that were produced from the statutorily prescribed separate survey exercises; and,
- the questionnaire and sampling approach was consistent with the methodological requirements for the 2003/04 General Survey.

A copy of the questionnaire that was used in this pilot exercise is reproduced at Annex C.

The Government welcomes comments on the use of a combined County and District Council General Survey questionnaire instead of separate questionnaires for all counties and districts.

2.3 Methodological considerations in running the surveys

There are a number of methodological issues in running the Best Value User Satisfaction Survey on which consultation views would be welcome. These are:

- A single prescribed research method (postal, telephone, face-to-face or, even electronic/internet-based) for the operation of all surveys;
- Stratified sampling and clustering;
- Allowing for the variable response amongst District Councils in weighting County Council results.

Research method

As in 2000/01, the vast majority of authorities undertook all of the surveys by post in 2003/04 (approximately 95%). In general, face-to-face surveys produce higher response rates than postal and/or telephone surveys (although response rates achieved from postal Best Value surveys have been high) – on average 45% across both rounds. A higher response rate reduces the impact of re-weighting in order to create a representative set of results. It is also claimed that face-to-face surveys can produce higher satisfaction results. If some authorities are achieving higher satisfaction levels by means of the method by which they are conducting the survey rather than a genuinely higher level of satisfaction amongst their residents, it could be considered artificial. It also creates problems in achieving genuine comparability of results across local authorities.

On the basis of the information supplied by local authorities about how their General survey was conducted, it is known that 16 authorities carried out the fieldwork using a face-to-face mode. Of these authorities, 11 had a BV3 (overall satisfaction with the authority) satisfaction level above the national average of 55%, 4 had a score below and 1 scored the national average. Set against that, only 4 secured an increase in their satisfaction rating from 2000/01 to 2003/04, 11 experienced a decline and 1 had exactly the same satisfaction level as in 2000/01.

It is unclear how much any difference in satisfaction ratings is down to the particular characteristics of this group of authorities or the research method. Nevertheless, the perception that higher satisfaction ratings result from face-to-face surveys may lead several authorities to adopt this mode in 2006/07. This will certainly not be possible for the majority of authorities due to the cost of face-to-face surveys.

Estimates based on standard market prices suggest that the national cost of running the General Survey would be approximately £3-4.5m for a postal survey compared with £14-16m for a face-to-face survey or a telephone survey. Given that the vast majority of local authorities would have to externally commission a face-to-face survey, there are also doubts about the size of the national market research survey fieldforce and its capability to handle such demands. It should also be noted, that a telephone survey would be difficult to operate, especially for the quality of life questions and other questions where there are long lists of optional answers.

In view of this, it is proposed that the 2006/07 Best Value User Satisfaction Survey have one prescribed research method. Given that the vast majority of local authorities also successfully operated the questionnaires as a postal survey in 2003/04, it is also proposed that the prescribed research method is postal.

The Government welcomes comments on the prescription of a single research method for the Best Value User Satisfaction Survey; and whether that should be a postal survey methodology.

Stratified sampling and clustering

In selecting their samples for the General Survey in both rounds of the survey to date, a number of authorities chose to use stratified sampling, often by electoral ward. 'Stratification' in sampling is the process whereby the researcher divides the survey population into sub-populations (strata), and random samples are taken from each stratum. For example, from the PAF (post code address file) the researcher is able to identify households from a particular ward. This information can be used to structure the sampling frame list (i.e. to ensure the sample covers all wards in an authority). This would reduce the sampling variation, and therefore produce a sample that is more likely to reflect the total population.

Some authorities, however, adopted an approach called 'clustering'. This involves selecting a representative number of sampling points (wards in this case) from which to randomly sample addresses⁴. The main advantage of clustering is that it involves significantly lower fieldwork thereby reducing costs. The main disadvantage is that clustering incurs a greater design effect. This effect reduces the effective sample size and so increases the margin of error in the data.

⁴ It should be noted that it is not acceptable to subsequently 'cluster' within the sampling points.

THE GOVERNMENT WELCOMES COMMENTS ON THE USE OF RE-WEIGHTING AND WEIGHTING IN THE BEST VALUE USER SATISFACTION SURVEY.

Allowing for the variable response rate amongst District Councils in weighting County Council results

Following the BVPI surveys 2003/04, a concern was raised by a County Council in relation to the weighting scheme used for the General Survey results. The geographical composition of the County – ranging from large towns to extensive rural areas – means that when they conduct surveys of their own they usually re-weight the results by District as well as other factors. This is because the response rate tends to vary significantly between Districts and there is a need to take this into account in calculating the final results.

The side effect of re-weighting, however, is to increase the sampling error in the data. This will vary for individual cases, so re-weighting may not be possible where increases incurred to the sampling error exceed reasonable limits.

The Government welcomes comments on the use of re-weighting Survey responses by district inside the counties' data.

2.4 Conclusion

Views on the issues raised in this consultation document would be welcome. Please ensure that you respond using the pro-forma which has been published on the ODPM website at: www.odpm.gov.uk/lg/consult and that your response is received by 6 February 2006.