

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Place survey challenge panel

FINAL REPORT

Membership of the panel

Cllr Mark Versallion (Chairman)

Cllr Stanley Sheinwald

Cllr Mitzi Green

Cllr Janet Mote

Officers

Mike Howes, Service Manager, Policy and Partnerships

Ed Hammond, Scrutiny Officer

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INTRODUCTION

This is the report of a challenge panel on the content of the Place Survey, which met on 1 September 2008.

The purpose of the challenge panel was to examine, comment upon and recommended changes to the draft Place Survey, prior to its being despatched to a sample of Harrow's residents.

The Place Survey is the new, national survey being sent to people across the country to gauge both their satisfaction with local services and their opinion of the local area. In Harrow, it will replace the Quality of Life survey, currently provided by MORI.

The new Survey constitutes a series of mandatory questions, which all authorities must ask, and space for discretionary questions, which authorities are free to choose themselves. Authorities are encouraged to choose their discretionary questions from a "question bank", which provides example questions for a wide range of issues. This is useful for two reasons – firstly, it absolves authorities of the responsibility of individually developing specific, local questions (although this is perhaps a double-edged sword) and secondly, it means that it is easier to compare authorities with one another, since the format of questions on similar subjects are more likely to be the same.

Our thanks are due to Mike Howes, Policy and Partnerships Service Manager, who assisted us in our discussions.

Survey methodology

We were advised that a number of surveys will be sent out at random to Harrow residents. Once returned, they will be weighted according to demographic group (according to Harrow's demographic makeup) and analysed accordingly.

We considered which discretionary questions might be included.

MAIN REPORT

We considered as a group a number of different areas where we felt that the additional of a discretionary question would be useful for the authority, and the council's partners, in gaining a better understanding of Harrow as an area.

Our principal concern was that the questions being asked should reflect, insofar as possible, the council's corporate priorities – the key things which the borough is trying to achieve on both a short and long term basis. However, this is difficult given the fact that while the priorities are often amended year on year, ideally the questions being asked in the Place Survey need to be the same for a reasonable period to allow historical comparisons to be made. Although questions can be changed year on year as well, this is not ideal as it makes it difficult to build up a series of data on a given subject that can accurately be compared.

We were also keen that the questions should allow historical comparison, where possible, with data from the Quality of Life survey, to ensure that pre-2008 data can continue to be used in combination with up to date information to plan services in the future.

We considered a number of key areas where the council's corporate priorities (both current and possible future), matters of local concern and performance issues indicated that additional questions would be worthwhile. Broadly speaking, we considered that additional questions should be included where it would be difficult to acquire information in other ways, where the question related directly to the council's corporate priorities, and where the question involved would constitute the most effective use of the comparatively little space available. We were concerned that the exercise of choosing discretionary questions had the potential to involve merely the shoehorning in of various unconnected questions into the non-mandated section of the survey. It was, we considered, imperative that there should be a logic underpinning the formulation of the discretionary portion.

Communications

We were advised that the communications contract with Westminster Council required an understanding of the effects of the council's communications on local people. The key method of assessing this was previously the Quality of Life survey, and consequently we were advised that the Place Survey would need to cover this issue effectively. None of the mandatory questions covered communications issues.

It was suggested to us, and agreed, that two questions should be asked on this subject: firstly, whether residents felt that they were kept informed of local developments, and secondly, on the fear of crime in the local area. This would ensure that the Westminster contract could be monitored effectively both generally, and specifically on the point (fear of crime) where historically communications have been most significantly challenged.

Community and diversity

We noted that only one mandatory question addressed diversity issues¹.

The relationship between residents is important for a number of reasons. Increased community cohesion not only helps Harrow to effectively define itself as a community – it can also have more immediate and tangible effects on other services provided by the council and its partners. A question that assesses how comfortable people are with their neighbours, and the extent to which they have meaningful relationships with those who live around them, could act as a useful bellwether, flagging up potential concerns for the future that could impact on a wide range of aspects of daily life in the borough.

We thought that it might be worthwhile for the survey to ask a question that covers people's relationships with their neighbours. It was suggested that the question in the bank on "respect and consideration" (question 4) might be appropriate for these purposes.

Street scene, and parks

The "clean and green" agenda is one that has historically been important to Harrow, and remains a key element of the corporate priorities. We noted that a number of questions related tangentially to the environment (in relation to quality of life), but that although street scene issues were covered, there were no questions on the quality of public green spaces, such as public parks. Given the council's prioritisation of this issue as part of the "clean and green" agenda it was thought important that a relevant question be asked on this topic.

It is unfortunate that there seems to be no question in the question bank which directly covers this issue. Although it was initially suggested that officers draft a Harrow-specific question, it was eventually decided that the issue of satisfaction with parks and open spaces could be incorporated within a more general question relating to satisfaction with cultural services.

Vulnerable people

The quality of care provided to vulnerable people (the elderly, those with social care needs, and others) was something we considered important enough to warrant an additional discretionary question.

We found that there were no entirely adequate questions in the question bank which could deal with the full spectrum of issues covered by this issue. Individual questions do exist relating to over 65s, or specifically to other vulnerable groups, but none which relate to vulnerable people in more general terms.

Given the increasing importance being placed by the council on services to vulnerable groups, it was felt that a question should be asked on this issue. We were, however, advised that it might be difficult to frame such a question, given that the only people in a position to provide a reformed response would be those with first-hand experience of social services – a comparatively small section of the population. We tend to agree with the officer's recommendation that issues relating to vulnerable people be instead picked up by the various new User Groups being established by Adults and Housing, for the purpose of communicating with people who receive these services, and their carers. However, we are keen that the outcome from discussions of these groups be given due consideration in strategic thinking in

¹ Question 18

the department, and it may be that it will be appropriate for P&F to consider issues arising from them in the coming months.

Other issues

We discussed a number of other subject areas, following which we decided not to recommend the inclusion of additional questions. Among these were matters relating to the development of the town centre. It was suggested that this issue was adequately covered by questions on clean streets, given that the only significant development on the horizon was likely to be the street scene works on St Ann's Road in the New Year. There was some disagreement within our group about the benefits of not asking questions about planned or ongoing developments in the town centre. However, given that there is a separate town centre survey carried out regularly, as well as a retailers' survey, we agreed that this was not as much of a priority as other questions.

CONCLUSIONS

Consequently, we have suggested that officers include the following questions in the voluntary section of the survey:

General satisfaction

How well informed do you think Harrow Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?

- Keeps us very well informed
 - Keeps us fairly well informed.....
 - Gives us only a limited amount of information
 - Doesn't tell us much at all about what it does
-

Fear of crime

How much is your own quality of life affected by fear of crime, on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is no effect and 10 is total effect on your quality of life?

- No effect – 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- Total effect – 10.....

Community cohesion

To what extent do you agree or disagree that people in this neighbourhood are willing to help their neighbours?

- Strongly agree
- Agree.....
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.....
- Don't know/not stated
-

General council services (incorporating parks and open spaces)

For each of the following services provided by Harrow Council, do you think the service has got better or worse over the last three years, or has it stayed the same?

Please tick ✓ one box per row

	Better	Stayed the same	Worse	Don't know
Keeping public land clear of litter and refuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collection of household waste	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local recycling facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doorstep collection of items for recycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local tips/Household waste recycling centres	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local transport information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local bus service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sport/leisure facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Libraries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Museums/galleries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Theatres/concert Halls	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parks and open spaces	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

It is also recommended:

- That Overview and Scrutiny revisit this issue in February or March 2009, when the results of the survey will have become available.
- That outcomes from the Adults and Housing User Group discussions be placed at the disposal of the relevant scrutiny leads and the chairman and vice-chairman of Performance and Finance as they become available.