



Report to Cabinet

Subject: Best Value User Satisfaction Surveys
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) consultation on
changes for 2006/07

Date: 2 February 2006

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1. Purpose of the Report

- § To inform members of changes being proposed by ODPM for the Best Value User Satisfaction general survey for 2006.
- § To seek member views on any response to consultation on these changes.

2. Background

Best Value user satisfaction surveys are now an integral part of the local government performance framework, helping to measure consistently what local people think of local authorities and the services they provide across the country.

Local authorities are required to carry out the surveys every three years, using a prescribed set of questions and to a prescribed format. The next surveys will need to be carried out in Autumn 2006.

Gedling BC has recognised the value of tracking public satisfaction with the council and its services and now carries out these surveys every year, albeit in a slightly reduced format in the years between the statutorily required surveys.

ODPM issued a consultation document in December 2005, setting out proposals to amend the General Survey for 2006/07. The consultation document also confirms that ODPM does not propose any changes to the separate planning, tenants and benefits service surveys for 2006. The document is available for reference at www.odpm.gov.uk/lg/consult. Responses to consultation are requested by 6 February 2006.

3. Proposals and Commentary

3.1 – Additional Questions – The main changes being proposed by ODPM are a number of additional changes. A full list of proposed additions is attached at **Appendix A**.

Some of the additional questions proposed cover issues similar to those that the Council voluntarily added to its own satisfaction survey in 2005 (e.g. satisfaction with the area overall). As such, I suggest therefore that we might support their inclusion here in any response to consultation.

Many of the other questions may also be of some value (for example, those seeking views on how people prefer to contact the Council) but these may also duplicate work already carried out.

The questions may also cause some confusion in two-tier areas where there is more than one council to contact. Services specific to one tier (e.g. electoral registration) should only be included in the questionnaire for that tier of authority.

The main concern here is the potential these extra questions have to increase the overall length of the questionnaire. Any increase in the length of the questionnaire may deter responses and increase costs. Consultants QCL Market Research, who have carried out this work on the Council's behalf in recent years, confirm this view. They suggest an increase to a 16-page survey from the current 12-page version could increase postage costs by 80%.

This is a particular issue for the Borough Council given our corporate policy that printed material is published in a minimum 12-point font size. The proposed changes would also make it virtually impossible to include any additional local questions without exceeding the 12 pages suggested maximum length.

The Council may therefore wish to suggest that, if new questions are added, others are deleted to ensure the overall length of the 2006 survey does not exceed that of the 2003 survey. Possible questions for deletion could include those relating to “bring” recycling sites, which are becoming increasingly less relevant as councils move to kerbside collection, and/or the qualitative questions around waste collection, information on which is better gathered locally.

3.2 – Changes to Layout/Structure – Changes here propose grouping together related questions about local services and quality of life and largely mirror the approach adopted in the Council's own 2005 satisfaction survey. As such, I would suggest these are supported.

3.3 – Joint/County and District General Survey – ODPM is seeking views on whether county councils should run joint services with district councils in their areas instead of separate surveys being conducted in each district and across the county. This approach was piloted, apparently successfully, in Dorset in 2003 and is said to have advantages in generating economies of scale, shared procurement and reducing consultation fatigue. The sample questionnaire, as

used in Dorset at that time, makes clear distinctions between services that are the responsibilities of the respective authorities while allowing for questions about quality of life (to which both councils in an area contribute) only once. There is also a potential application here in relation to public satisfaction elements of the Local Area Agreement.

However, this approach does not allow easily for separate analysis of the impact of the two councils involved in addressing quality of life questions, nor does it allow separate analysis of how well each council keeps its residents informed. There is also some scope for confusion in responses to questions about overall satisfaction with each council and with the area. It should be borne in mind that data gathered on these matters to date (for us this covers three surveys) has been gathered from a single council survey, about Gedling Borough Council, and any change to the approach used may make ongoing comparisons less reliable as a result of a changed methodology.

Moreover, our experience to date suggests there is little advantage to be gained in terms of economies of scale, since separate questionnaires still need to be printed and distributed in each district area. Response rates vary between districts and, to allow for a meaningful response rate from each district, the county-wide sample can be unnecessarily large. In addition, a questionnaire incorporating all county and district questions would almost certainly exceed the 12 page suggested maximum, especially at 12 point size.

3.4 – Other changes – ODPM is proposing specifying a single methodology for collection of the data (by postal survey only) instead of offering the option of face-to-face questioning as at present. It is felt this is fairer and most cost-effective overall and that the proposals should be supported.

There are also a number of other technical issues around stratified sampling and clustering, and around the desirability of reweighting county responses by district on which views are sought.

4. Resource Implications

Funding to carry out an annual satisfaction survey in line with previous practice is included in base budgets. However, as highlighted above, if the questionnaire length is increased, costs may increase and this would need to be considered in due course.

5. Recommendation

Members' are **recommended** to support submission of a response to the consultation reflecting the issues highlighted in this report.