
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Department for Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
LONDON
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25 May 2011

Dear Secretary of State

THE PLACE SURVEY

In my letter of 8 April about the Citizenship Survey, I said that I would write to you again when we had prepared our report on the discontinuation of the Place Survey. This is now enclosed.

You will see that the report concludes that we see no objection to the decision to cease the survey.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Statistical Expenditure Report 2: The Place Survey

Statistical Expenditure Reports review substantive cuts and changes to UK official statistics. This report has been prepared and issued independently by the UK Statistics Authority.

The Place Survey was conducted only once, in 2008. It collected information on national indicators used to assess local government performance for county councils, metropolitan district councils, London boroughs and unitary authorities. Topics covered included community cohesion, perceptions of anti-social behaviour, health and well-being.

It was not a single survey; instead, each local authority in England ran its own survey which asked a common set of questions about the national indicators, together with other questions of particular interest to the individual local authority. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) provided standard methods, a question bank and an operational manual to improve comparability between areas.

The survey results were not released as National Statistics and the Statistics Authority has not proposed that they should be assessed with a view to designation as National Statistics¹. A DCLG review of the 2008 survey highlighted concerns about the quality of the data, for example that response rates were “unacceptably low”².

The Place Survey was a postal exercise, administered either by individual local authorities themselves or contracted to private sector companies. In total it was estimated to have cost more than £5million to run in 2008, with most of these costs incurred by local authorities.

In May 2010, DCLG completed a public consultation about some ways of improving the quality and accessibility of the survey, with a view to informing a second run of the survey that was scheduled for autumn 2010. However, on 10 August 2010, DCLG announced that the survey would be discontinued³. The announcement stated that the move was “part of concerted efforts by the new Government to release councils from Whitehall control - leaving them free to respond flexibly and effectively to the needs of their residents.” We were subsequently told that because the national indicator set had been abolished, the collection of data to inform progress against indicators was no longer required. The abolition of the national indicator set was formally announced on 14 October⁴.

In addition to local authorities, other users of the statistics included the Home Office, Cabinet Office, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health, Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office. The Audit Commission also used the survey results as part of Comprehensive Area Assessments. The main users were not consulted about the decision to cease the survey. However, DCLG was aware of the Local Government

¹ The definition of National Statistics and the procedures for designating further sets of statistics are set out in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007.

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/statisticalreviewplacesurvey>

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1682971>

⁴ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/newsstories/newsroom/1740503>

Association's (LGA)⁵ view of the survey (in their response to the May consultation, their stated preferred approach was to cancel the survey that autumn).

The Statistics Authority concludes that despite a lack of specific consultation on the proposed cancellation, DCLG had a suitable evidence base upon which to make its decision, including knowledge of:

- changing user needs in central Government;
- concerns about data quality; and
- the views of local government via the LGA.

Whilst it would have been more transparent if DCLG had consulted users directly about the cancellation, the earlier consultation completed in May 2010 can be seen, in the circumstances, to have met the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. We have seen no evidence that significant beneficial use was made of the survey results when it was conducted, or that its cancellation will now have a serious adverse effect on public administration or accountability. Had such adverse effects arisen, the Statistics Authority would have expected these to have been drawn to its attention by now. We have not received any representations about the cessation, and we note that the LGA has welcomed the decision. On that basis we can see no objection to the decision taken.

We think that DCLG should publicly report the findings of the May consultation and set out what it sees as the lessons from the discontinuation, after only a single round, of the Place Survey for future statistical planning.

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⁵ The Local Government Association is a voluntary lobbying organisation, acting as the voice of the local government sector.

ANNEX – FURTHER DETAILS

Detail of the statistics

When the Place Survey was first conducted in 2008, the intention was to conduct it every two years. The common series of questions were about a specified subset of the national indicators for use in local area agreements. Local authorities were then able to choose other questions of particular interest to them, drawn from a question bank, prepared by DCLG.

The specified subset comprised 18 of the national indicators. From April 2010 five of the indicators drawn from the Place Survey were removed from the set. The Place Survey indicators were as follows:

- NI 1 Percentage of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
- NI 2 Percentage of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood (deleted in April 2010)
- NI 3 Civic participation in the local area (deleted in April 2010)
- NI 4 Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality
- NI 5 Overall / general satisfaction with local area
- NI 6 Participation in regular volunteering
- NI 17 Perceptions of anti-social behaviour
- NI 21 Dealing with local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police
- NI 22 Perceptions of parents taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children in the area
- NI 23 Perceptions that people in the area treat one another with respect and consideration (deleted in April 2010)
- NI 27 Understanding of local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police
- NI 37 Awareness of civil protection arrangements in the local area (deleted in April 2010)
- NI 41 Perceptions of drunk or rowdy behaviour as a problem
- NI 42 Perceptions of drug use or drug dealing as a problem
- NI 119 Self-reported measure of overall health and well-being
- NI 138 Satisfaction of people over 65 with both home and neighbourhood
- NI 139 The extent to which older people receive the support they need to live independently at home
- NI 140 Fair treatment by local services (deleted in April 2010).

The Place Survey was postal, and although it received large numbers of responses (from over half a million adults; the minimum number of 1,100 responses was met by the vast majority of local authorities), the response rates were very low (with thirty authorities having response rates of under 30 per cent). There was a high risk of bias despite the use of a weighting methodology. DCLG published the report of a Statistical Quality Review in February 2010; some aspects of the review had earlier informed the preparation and publication of the 2008 Survey results, and others were picked up in the consultation for the planned 2010 Survey.

Initial results of the 2008 Place Survey were published in June 2009 and additional data in September 2009. They were not badged as National Statistics.

Details of the change being made

The survey has been discontinued with immediate effect. However, individual local authorities will be able to conduct local surveys using the previous questionnaire or drawing on the question bank, as they choose.

The decision to cancel the survey

We were told that because of the profile of the survey, its primary purpose (to inform the national indicator set and local area agreements), and its expense, DCLG considered it appropriate that Ministers should make the decision about its future rather than the Head of Profession for Statistics.

DCLG was aware of the LGA's view of the survey (in their consultation response in May, their stated preferred approach was to cancel the survey that autumn). After the announcement to discontinue the survey was made, the LGA said, "It is good news that the Place Survey will not now go ahead ... The declared aim of these, and all, official statistics is to meet user need. The LGA understands that for many councils this was not the case".

DCLG has not published a response to the consultation it conducted; we were told that this was because it had been overtaken by events. Neither has DCLG published an assessment of the impact of ceasing the survey.

The DCLG Head of Profession for Statistics wrote to the National Statistician about the possibility of the cancellation at the same time as Ministers in other Government Departments were consulted about the proposals. In her letter, the Head of Profession advised that she did not have major concerns about the proposal, but would be happy to discuss further.

Why this decision was made and alternative data sources

We were told by DCLG that the decision to cut the survey reflected Government policy on localism and de-regulation – that because the national indicator set had been abolished, the collection of data to inform progress against indicators was no longer required.

We are not aware of any alternative data sources that provide the same type of information as that collected via the Place Survey (although some local authorities carried out interim Place Surveys in years that the main Survey did not run, or resident surveys which cover similar topics).

Main users and uses of the statistics, and the impact of the proposal/decision

According to the DCLG consultation document, the Place Survey was an element in Government's local performance framework. Other Government departments – the Home Office, Cabinet Office, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health, Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office also used the survey results for those national indicators in which they had a policy interest.

The Audit Commission also used the survey results as part of Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Local authorities used information about both the national indicators and from other survey questions (on local authority-run services and facilities) to gauge local views, aid

communication with residents, and inform policy at a local level. The use of common standards enabled some measure of benchmarking between local areas – although the technical problems with the survey will have raised questions about the validity of this.

The survey was only conducted once, so its cessation does not lead to the loss of a significant data holding. Because the survey is well documented, local authorities will be able to conduct consistent surveys in future should they choose to do so.

Impact on professional capacity

The Head of Profession told us that the discontinuation of the Survey will not lead to the loss of professional statistical capacity.