

THE PLACE SURVEY

On 7 July, Communities and Local Government, in collaboration with the Audit Commission, published a detailed Manual to support the Place Survey, which will provide the means by which:

- a) Some 18 of the targets included in the Local Area Agreements (LAAs) can be measured;
- b) local authorities can capture people's views, experiences and perceptions about their local area and the services provided;
- c) people's changing perceptions can be tracked over time;
- d) government (local and national) can assess whether interventions in an area result in the right outcomes for local people.

The Place Survey therefore provides the basic data by which a number of national indicators can be measured. These indicators measure how well Government priorities, set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review, are being delivered by local government and local government partnerships over the next three years. The indicators to be measured through this Place Survey are set out in the Appendix.

The Manual sets out national standards for collecting this data, and a Technical Annex details the statistical methodology to be employed.

Analysing the views, experiences and perceptions of rural residents

Under the mainstreaming approach now adopted by Defra, it is vital that data on the views, experiences and perceptions of rural residents can be identified separately. Data from the Place Survey would therefore support the rural proofing of a number of important targets and service outcomes. Defra has provided funding to the Rural Community Councils to 'rural proof' the LAAs, and these data would be essential to carrying out their appraisals.

However, the Manual and the Technical Annex do not appear to emphasise adequately this need for separate data for rural residents or support a consistent methodology for separately identifying rural and urban residents. In particular, the Manual and Technical Annex appear deficient in:

- a) only providing the option (rather than making it a requirement) to produce separate rural and urban results, with the Technical Annex simply stating that 'analysis of the Place Survey by rural and urban areas *may* be appropriate'; (*my emphasis*);
- b) not requiring the sample size or its distribution across the local authority area to be robust enough to enable analyses of rural residents to be statistically valid within appropriate confidence limits;
- c) not supporting the use of the urban-rural classification as the consistent identifier of rural residents; instead, the Technical Manual

(para 90) identifies a number of different criteria for 'deciding if an area is rural or urban', and concludes that 'the population density of a ward will usually give at least a fair estimate of whether respondents in that area are living in the town or the countryside.'

Meeting Defra's own Service Objectives

One of Defra's Department Service Objectives (DSOs) is to support 'Stronger Rural Communities', which the Treasury has made clear are no less important than PSAs. Defra has identified Intermediate Outcomes (IOs) for each DSO; one of the IOs for 'Stronger Rural Communities' is:

The evidenced needs of rural people and communities are addressed through mainstream public delivery and policy.

Defra has made it clear that it 'is not directly responsible for most policies that affect rural areas but can engage with the policy owners in other departments, where necessary, to ensure that those policies adequately address the needs of all people, regardless of where they live'. It also recognises that its ability to identify priority areas for action and to influence others will depend on the quality of its rural evidence base.

It is clear that unless the shortcomings of the Place Survey are addressed urgently (it is due to start this month – with sampling processes) the ability of Defra to generate valuable data to support its own DSO and of the RCCs to 'rural proof' some aspects of the LAAs will be severely diminished.

Chris Elton
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Appendix

National Indicators (NIs) to be measured by the Place Survey

NI 1	% of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
NI 2	% of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood
NI 3	Civic participation in the local area
NI 4	% 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 issues 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
NI 27	Understanding of local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime issues by the local council and police
NI 37	Awareness of civil protection arrangements in the local area
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 people's overall health and wellbeing
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