



Giving the public what they require

Discovering what customers need or want has traditionally been a cornerstone of private enterprise to target selling. But now a group of local authorities is successfully using it to better target spending, as **Neeta Dutta** reports.

Public perception of local highways and transport services lies at the heart of local government policy, yet this perception is rarely quantified and never compared among authorities sector wide. So, in a bid to rectify this and benchmark the highways and transport sector's service performance, 33 local authorities agreed last year to send out a standardised public-satisfaction survey to their residents.

And, with the results now published, these councils are already reaping the benefits as they use them to pinpoint where to spend their limited resources for maximum good.

For the National Highways Best Value Benchmarking Club (NHBVBC) and the County Surveyors' Society's South West Highways Service Improvement Group (CSS SWHSIG), which launched the initiative, asking the public what they honestly think about local highways and transport in their area was long overdue.

While the Government is keen to enforce greater public accountability for public services – encouraging local authorities to move towards outcome-based performance

with publication of the second local transport plan (LTP2) – the group believes there has been 'little in the way of guidance as to how this should be carried out'.

Left to find their own means of measuring public views, authorities have adopted a wide variety of methods, and this inconsistency has 'hampered any efforts to compare and challenge or identify and share best practice.'

In late 2006, the National Highway Efficiency Liaison Group (HELG) concluded that this lack of coherent and consistent customer surveys was a major barrier to 'objectively understanding improvement and efficiency initiatives.'

So, when the NHBVBC set about providing guidance on the issue the following year, HELG asked it to also develop survey proposals.

'It was clearly time to do something,' says Peter Radford, county bridge manager at Somerset County Council and former chair of the design division of the NHBVBC. 'As providers of public services, it is vital that local authorities understand the public's perception of the quality of those services.'

At the same time, discussions in the South West among the

CSS SWHSIG member authorities were focused on this issue too. 'As a group, we had recognised for some time that there was a need for a benchmarking satisfaction survey,' says its chairman, Adrian Hale. 'Furthermore, we wanted the survey exercise to be transparent, so authorities could compare and analyse their performance. We did this as we had found in the past that this is effective in driving improvement.'

A joint NHBVBC/SWHSIG working party was set up and it was decided a questionnaire which would reflect LTP2 priorities, as well as other national objectives, was the way forward.

Somerset County Council arranged a conference in Taunton in November 2007 for transport and highways officials in a bid to gain their views on the coverage of the survey. Delegates used electronic voting pads to pick everything, including methodology and a wide range of questions for which they wanted a public view, which led to a 'comprehensive, but admittedly-overlong' 17-page draft questionnaire. Whittled down to 12 pages, the *National highways and transport satisfaction survey* was born.

The steering group also saw soft-

ware engaged to administer the satisfaction survey, and a market research company procured to undertake the work. Ipsos MORI was employed and a 'random postal method' chosen for the questionnaire. This approach sorts responses into postcode areas and 'super output areas', so that data can be compared with census and health data.

The survey service cost £6,000 for an existing member of the benchmarking club, while non-members paid £6,500. Ben Marshall, project director for Ipsos MORI says: 'This was quite a project, and the "club approach" allowed significant economies of scale, delivering savings to individual authorities.'

During formation of the questionnaire, a further 18 authorities from across the country opted to join with the 15 participating authorities in the Southwest. Of these 33 local authorities, 30 chose to make their results public.

Results were gathered under themes linked to LTP2 priorities and other highways and transport-related topics (see table). Aggregation provided overall public satisfaction for an authority and the collective view of all respondents

to the survey nationally. Presented in table format, a local authority's 'cold score' out of 100 is listed, with scores below 50 in pink to highlight this as a problem area. By comparing this with the other local authorities listed, councils can see where they are ranked overall, or against similar authorities.

So, for example, a county council can compare results with other county councils in the survey. A 'scope for improvement' column then relates an authority's score to that of the best performers.

But this is not all. Local authorities can delve deeper into their scores to pinpoint areas for improvement. Presented electronically, a table will show, for instance, the main results in such LTP2 priority areas as delivering accessibility, tackling congestion and road safety, and the underlying themes of public transport, walking and cycling, highway maintenance and enforcement.

Then, with the aid of the drill down feature in Building Software's eContract database, users can click on a section to see a break-

down of the different aspects of the results. So, for instance, while the table shows a borough council at 11 out of 30 for its accessibility overall, it is 28th for 'ease of access to key services for people with disabilities'. By clicking on the 'accessibility' section, a list of the 24 questions that were asked in relation to this are revealed and, from this, it can be seen that 'ease of access to leisure facilities for people with disabilities' is a particular issue.

Hale says: 'The survey allows the local authority to pinpoint where it

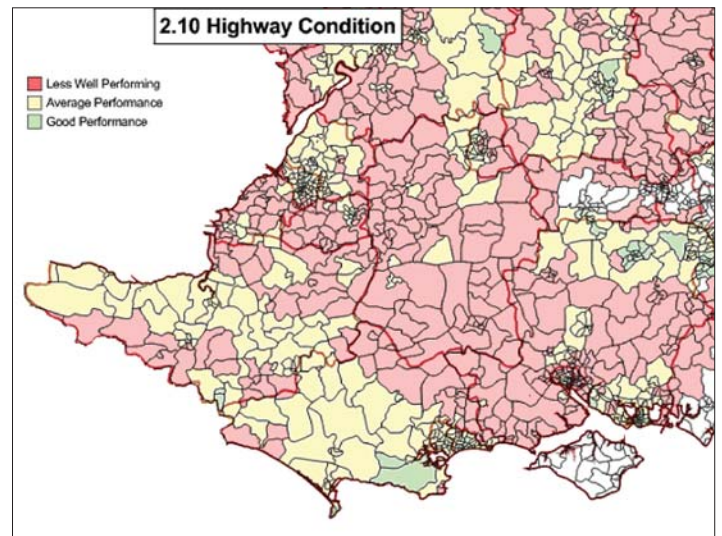
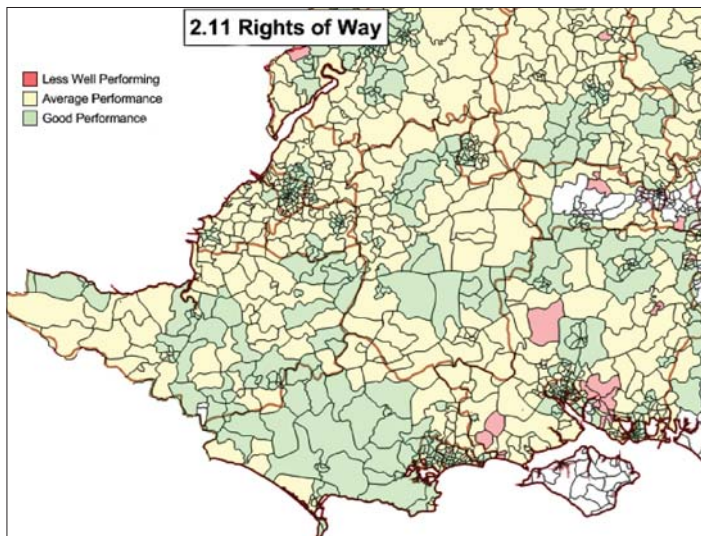
Key benchmarking indicator	Best performing county authorities	Best performing unitary & metropolitan
Accessibility	Northumberland CC North Yorkshire CC Suffolk CC	Poole BC LB of Hackney Plymouth City Council
Tackling congestion	Northumberland CC North Yorkshire CC Derbyshire CC	Plymouth City Council Poole BC Swindon BC
Road safety	North Yorkshire CC Hampshire CC Staffordshire CC	Poole BC Portsmouth City Council South Gloucestershire
Public transport	Oxfordshire CC Leicestershire CC Derbyshire CC	LB of Hackney Plymouth City Council Swindon BC
Walking	Leicestershire CC North Yorkshire CC Suffolk CC	Portsmouth City Council Poole BC Bournemouth BC
Cycling	Northumberland CC Oxfordshire CC Derbyshire CC	South Gloucestershire Poole BC Swindon BC
Rights of way	Leicestershire CC North Yorkshire CC Derbyshire CC	Poole BC Portsmouth City Council South Gloucestershire
Highway maintenance	Leicestershire CC Cornwall CC Suffolk CC	Portsmouth City Council Poole BC Bournemouth BC

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transport



needs to spend its pot of money to the best benefit.' Both Hale and Radford are keen to stress it was never intended as a 'finger-pointing exercise,' however, and that those authorities which have done less well have already shown a 'willing commitment' to find out how they can improve.

'Every authority has areas it can improve on,' Radford says. 'Also, if someone has improved year-on-year without spending a lot more, then this can be more valuable than simply coming at the top of the table.' For instance, the council which came top overall in the survey performed very well in many areas. However, by examining its results in more detail, it is clear there is still scope for improvement.

Hale says: 'What is important is that authorities don't just look at their ranking in isolation but also take account of satisfaction levels because there are a few services, such as road safety education, where no authority performs particularly well.

'Ultimately, it's all about the public, and there is no point doing all this unless authorities take note of the findings and take meaningful action.'

While the tables have presented the data for overall comparison, mapping the results has provided authorities with a vital link with other location-based issues (see above). According to Radford, 'the data comes alive when one sees the variations on a map background'.

This mapping element of the project won a grant from SWRIEP. It supported the development and roll out of the mapping system,

which allows problem 'hot spots' to be identified.

It is already possible to look across authority boundaries to see where these 'hot spots' are shared with neighbours, and further data overlay, such as map-based health or deprivation data from the National Health Service, could be used to make cross-service and authority assessments.

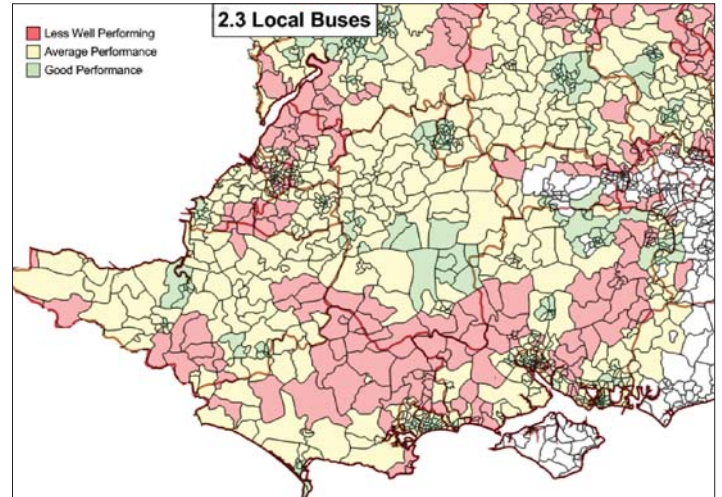
Survey findings will help with transport strategies such as bus strategies, cycling strategies, rights of way improvement plans and school travel plans. They can also be used in LTP annual progress reports, and used to inform quality of life and healthy living strategies.

Hence, the survey is to be repeated for the next two years, in order to give authorities data that will monitor the impact of work on certain aspects of a service as well as any changes overall.

The data could also help set realistic targets, and Hale and Radford are keen to see more local authorities taking part.

'Hats off to all 33 which joined in this first survey,' Radford says. 'It was a brave move, but since the results have come in, we have polled the participants and received excellent feedback. Clearly, the project has struck a chord, and it is delivering what authorities needed – good-quality, comparable data they can do lots of good things with.'

• **More information** on the survey and how to participate is online. ☺: www.nhtsurvey.org Local authorities should register by the end of March 2009 to take part in the next survey.



five 'honest serving-men'

Sent to thousands of households across the 33 local authorities, the *National highways and transport satisfaction survey* questionnaire aimed to discover what service areas needed improving the most, and which areas had the most potential to improve. Questions identifying who and where to target for improvements were vital to ensure money was spent in the right areas, while how the improvements could be delivered would provide the next step for local authorities.

What services need improving the most is based on benchmarking with others and internal comparison of customer satisfaction levels across the range of services provided.

Which service areas have the most potential to improve is based on what others have achieved – this is measured by looking at the biggest gap between your own authority and best performers.

Who the improvements should be targeted at is based on what different types of respondents think of the service, for example, older people or people with disabilities.

Where improvements should be made is based on mapping analysis. This shows in which areas of a local authority satisfaction levels are lower than elsewhere.

Finding out what the best performers are doing and getting in touch to share best practice is **how** improvements can be delivered.