



Research Note

Updated January 2010

Briefing Note 5

PEOPLE, PERCEPTIONS AND PLACE: THE SANDWELL POSITION

Ipsos MORI have recently published the report “People, Perceptions and Place.¹” This report helps local public services and partnerships better understand what factors affect key outcomes such as satisfaction with quality of life, community cohesion, feelings of influence and ratings of local services. The findings combine an analysis of the recent release of national Place Survey data by Communities and Local Government (CLG), plus MORI’s own analysis of the Place Survey for those authorities whose data they have access to.

The aim of this paper is to summarise the main points from the MORI report, and to present some further analysis of Sandwell’s position on the “Area Challenge Index” that MORI discuss.

The key national trends

Increased satisfaction with local areas...

One of the most positive findings from the analysis is an increase in ratings of local quality of life, with 80% now saying they are satisfied with their area compared with 75% in 2006. This still tends to be lower in urban and more deprived areas (Sandwell 62% - up from 60% in 2006/7). However, London, and inner London boroughs in particular, are improving faster – with satisfaction here up nine percentage points to 80%, now on a par with the average across the country. This overall increase in satisfaction with areas does not particularly chime with trends seen in other national surveys on similar questions, but it is supported within the Place Survey findings by significant drops in concern about local problems.

¹ [Ipsos MORI Local “People, Perceptions and Place” June 2009](#)

...and improvements in ASB

For example, ratings on key facets of anti-social behaviour (ASB) are improving quickly. There have been real drops in concern about drug dealing/users (down 12 percentage points to 31% - this has fallen slightly to 46% in Sandwell) and problems with teenagers (still a problem for 45% of people, but down 12 percentage points – this has fallen from 65% to 55% in Sandwell). Even litter and rubbish are slightly less of a concern. Other problems like drunken and rowdy behaviour have changed less (and this has risen by 8.5 percentage points in Sandwell). But nationally overall, the 7-strand index of different ASB measures (NI 17) is down by three percentage points. MORI's analysis shows how closely related overall ratings of quality of life are to this concern about ASB. This suggests that councils, police forces and other local partners are making progress in dealing with what most concerns the public – however in Sandwell NI 17 has increased 6 percentage points since 2006/7, whilst our improvement in satisfaction is low, suggesting that ASB is still not being tackled to the extent that local residents would like to see (or *perceive* to see).

But satisfaction with the council is down...

This national improvement makes it particularly disappointing that satisfaction with local government is going *down* – and by a significant amount. MORI's data suggests that the key overall measure of satisfaction with the way the council runs things is down from 53% to around 45% (in Sandwell this is down from 44% to 37%). Now, fewer than half of residents are satisfied with the performance of their authority, the lowest national score recorded in a decade or more. And this appears to be fairly consistent across the board, except for inner London boroughs, which have only fallen by one point, increasing the inner-outer London gap first noted a few years ago. Overall there is now a 10 point gap between inner London, where satisfaction averages 56%, and outer London where it has fallen to 46%. So it seems that, overall, local government is doing a good job on place-shaping – on quality of life and key measures of ASB and liveability – but as an institution it is worse rated than ever. It simply does not get the credit for the improvements that residents themselves, the Audit Commission and others have noted.

... because communications in decline?

Part of the reason for decline may be the apparent fall in how well informed people feel: while question changes preclude a direct comparison, it is notable that only 38% feel they are kept informed about local services (33% in Sandwell). This lack of connection between observed improvements and credit for making them can be seen very clearly on litter/rubbish. While fewer people say this is a problem locally, satisfaction with council services on dealing with litter has gone *down*. Again, there is no credit gained from tangible improvements.

Cohesion also under pressure – particularly in urban areas outside London

However, there is also an apparently less positive movement on the key cohesion measure included in the Place Survey – whether people from different backgrounds get on well together in the area. The data here suggests this has declined from 79% to 76% overall, with Metropolitan/Unitary authorities outside London least likely to feel cohesion is strong, with only 73% agreeing (in Sandwell this stands at 65% - down 9 percentage points since 2006/7).

And how are local partners faring?

The greater focus on areas as whole in the Place Survey is seen in the inclusion of questions on other key services, in particular the police and health services – although there are no consistent questions to compare trends on here. It appears that satisfaction levels with the police are similar to those seen for councils (47% are satisfied with the police – 48% in Sandwell), but satisfaction with hospitals is higher (65%, Sandwell 68%). GPs are the best rated of all (77%, Sandwell 71%). Even dentists are nine percentage points better rated than councils nationally (54% satisfied - 60% in Sandwell). These patterns are not particularly surprising, and

reflect other earlier studies – as do the differences between authority types. In particular, London again stands out, with residents more satisfied with the police, but generally less satisfied with health services.

What is driving these perceptions?

The bulk of the analysis in the report goes beyond these simple trends and uses statistical techniques to pick out which factors seem most important in driving perceptions of these key outcomes. Of course, as with any survey data, proving cause and effect is impossible, but there are still some very clear messages.

It's not all in our control...

MORI's approach firstly tries to separate out those factors that are **within** the control of local public services and those that are **not**. This helps to provide a better understanding of what is determined by area characteristics and what services can actually do. A key point remains – that perceptions are not as easy to influence as we might expect. As an example, MORI can explain 82% of all variation in satisfaction with local areas knowing only five characteristics of the local population:

- the proportion of the population with degrees;
- the proportion of people who are under-occupying their homes;
- the deprivation level;
- the proportion of the population aged under 21;
- and which region the area is in.

Clearly, most of these factors are not in the direct or immediate control of local services. It is, therefore, vital to not simply take perception scores at face value, but take account of how easy or difficult it is to achieve satisfaction in a specific area, particularly when these types of measures are used to judge the performance of services or partnerships. So, for example, while they may not get the highest absolute scores, places like Wandsworth seem to be doing better than expected on overall satisfaction with the council, and places like Manchester are doing better than we would predict on the cohesion measure of whether people from different backgrounds get on well together.

The Area Challenge Index

MORI's *Frontiers*² studies have always been about taking better account of context when interpreting perception measures. This is an increasingly important issue when, on the one hand, so much of performance is now judged on perceptions, but on the other hand, as we have seen, these perceptions are highly related to factors that are not in the direct or immediate control of local agencies. MORI have tried to look across the key outcome measures in the Place Survey to see what background characteristics are consistently associated with making satisfaction hard to achieve – and created the Ipsos MORI “**Area Challenge Index**”³.

Some very useful area classification systems are already available, along with useful indices published by government and others. However, as yet nothing tries to summarise how difficult it is to achieve high perception scores in particular areas, which is what MORI are trying to do here. Obviously, different background factors will be more or less important for different

² Frontiers of Performance in Local Government

³ Published in full in Mind the Gap: Frontiers of Performance in Local Government V

services, but there are core features and domains that remain fairly consistent. From this synthesis MORI have constructed a seven domain index which includes:

1. **The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD):** this is itself a composite index, and has been seen in analysis time and again to be very powerfully related to perceptions – the more deprived an area, the harder it will be to achieve satisfaction across a range of issues.
2. **Ethnic diversity:** this has also come up in previous analyses, the more diverse an area, the harder it is to achieve satisfaction. Interestingly, one key factor that is positively related to diversity is feelings of influence in local areas, which again chimes with other work.
3. **Young people:** the more people aged 19 or under in an area, the harder it is to achieve satisfaction. The analysis does not prove that this *causes* dissatisfaction, but it does not need to, as the aim is only to assess which areas will have the hardest job in achieving high satisfaction levels. The challenge from having a large proportion of young people in your area comes out more strongly and consistently in this analysis than has been seen in any previous studies.
4. **Population churn:** fairly intuitively, the greater the turnover of local populations, the harder it is to achieve satisfaction.
5. **Physical living conditions:** a number of these measures correlate with perceptions, but the one that comes out most consistently is a measure of over-occupancy - the more households over-occupying their homes in a local area, the harder it is to achieve satisfaction.
6. **Urbanity:** the more urban, the harder it is to achieve positive perceptions.
7. **Region:** in particular, being in the North East is associated with higher satisfaction (even after accounting for other characteristics included in the models), while being in London is negatively associated.

From this MORI have created scores for each local authority area on how easy or difficult a job it is for them to achieve high ratings on key satisfaction measures – effectively how challenging it will be to do well on these perception measures. The index scores run from 1-100, where 1 represents the least challenged area and 100 the most challenged.

This analysis suggests that from all areas in the country, **Newham, Hackney and Tower Hamlets** have the hardest job in achieving positive perceptions, while areas such as **Hambleton, North Norfolk, Derbyshire Dales, Eden** and **Northumberland** have it the easiest. The “challenged” areas are much more likely to be in **London** (although it does also have some of the easiest, such as the City of London), but other large urban centres like **Manchester, Birmingham and Blackburn** are confirmed as facing tough challenges in achieving high levels of satisfaction. Among Districts, places like **Oxford and Burnley** have a combination of background characteristics that will make it hard to score highly on perception measures.

A table of the five most and least challenged for each type of authority are shown on the following page:

Table 1. Most and least challenged by type of authority

| Most Challenged Metropolitan/ Unitary authorities | | Least Challenged Metropolitan/ Unitary authorities | |
|--|-------|---|-------|
| Name of authority | Index | Name of authority | Index |
| Birmingham | 71 | East Riding of Yorkshire | 14 |
| Blackburn with Darwen | 70 | Durham | 13 |
| Manchester | 70 | Rutland | 8 |
| Leicester | 69 | Shropshire | 7 |
| Luton | 68 | Northumberland | 3 |

| Most Challenged London Boroughs | | Least Challenged London Boroughs | |
|------------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Name of authority | Index | Name of authority | Index |
| Newham | 100 | Kensington & Chelsea | 47 |
| Hackney | 88 | Richmond upon Thames | 44 |
| Tower Hamlets | 86 | Bromley | 44 |
| Barking & Dagenham | 80 | Havering | 42 |
| Haringey | 77 | City of London | 34 |

| Most Challenged District/ Borough authorities | | Least Challenged District/ Borough authorities | |
|--|-------|---|-------|
| Name of authority | Index | Name of authority | Index |
| Oxford | 59 | Arun | 27 |
| Burnley | 58 | Taunton Deane | 27 |
| Hastings | 57 | Waveney | 26 |
| Preston | 53 | South Ribble | 26 |
| Pendle | 53 | Tandridge | 26 |

(100= most challenged, 1= least)
Source: Ipsos MORI

Sandwell's Position

As you can see from the tables above, Sandwell does not rank in the five most or least challenged in the country. However, we have obtained further data from MORI, so we can compare Sandwell's score with those of its CIPFA nearest neighbours. The results of this are shown on the next page:

Table 2. Challenge Index for Sandwell & its Statistical Neighbours

| CIPFA Nearest Neighbours (post April 2007) | Index | CIPFA Nearest Neighbours (post April 2007) | Index |
|---|--------------|---|--------------|
| Sandwell Metropolitan Borough | 60 | Bolton Metropolitan Borough | 51 |
| Coventry City | 58 | Derby City | 51 |
| Oldham Metropolitan Borough | 57 | Stoke on Trent City | 50 |
| Rochdale Metropolitan Borough | 57 | Knowsley Metropolitan Borough | 49 |
| Kingston upon Hull City | 55 | Tameside Metropolitan Borough | 46 |
| Middlesbrough | 54 | Dudley Metropolitan Borough | 38 |
| Wolverhampton City | 54 | Rotherham Metropolitan Borough | 37 |
| Walsall Metropolitan Borough | 53 | Gateshead Metropolitan Borough | 32 |

So we can see that Sandwell ranks highest amongst its statistical neighbours, with a Challenge Index of 60, and that despite the fact that these are deemed “similar” authorities, many will rank more closely with the least challenged, than the most challenged in the country.

The work by MORI goes on to calculate the overall satisfaction score (NI 5) that an area could expect to get, based on the current prevailing conditions. If we compare that expected score with the actual NI 5 score that they achieved in the last Place Survey, we can see those areas that are performing better than expected, and those who have yet to achieve their potential.

Table 3. Actual & Predicted NI 5 Scores for Sandwell & its Statistical Neighbours

| CIPFA Nearest Neighbours (post April 2007) | NI 5 Predicted score | NI 5 Actual score | Gap |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council | 70 | 65 | -5 |
| Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council | 72 | 67 | -5 |
| Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council | 65 | 62 | -3 |
| Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council | 69 | 67 | -2 |
| Stoke on Trent City Council | 71 | 70 | -1 |
| Wolverhampton City Council | 72 | 71 | -1 |
| Derby City Council | 78 | 78 | -1 |
| Coventry City Council | 76 | 76 | 0 |
| Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council | 74 | 74 | 0 |
| Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council | 77 | 77 | 0 |
| Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council | 74 | 75 | 1 |
| Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council | 70 | 71 | 1 |
| Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council | 76 | 81 | 5 |
| Middlesbrough Council | 68 | 74 | 6 |
| Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council | 62 | 72 | 10 |
| Kingston upon Hull City Council | 68 | 81 | 13 |

In Sandwell, we are under-performing on NI 5 (satisfaction with the area as a place to live), achieving a score of 62 in the Place Survey, compared with an expected score of 65, based on our current challenges. Rochdale and Tameside have a larger gap to close (5 percentage points), whereas two CIPFA neighbours (Knowsley and Kingston upon Hull) are far out-performing their expected NI 5 scores. There could be lessons to be learnt from these two areas.

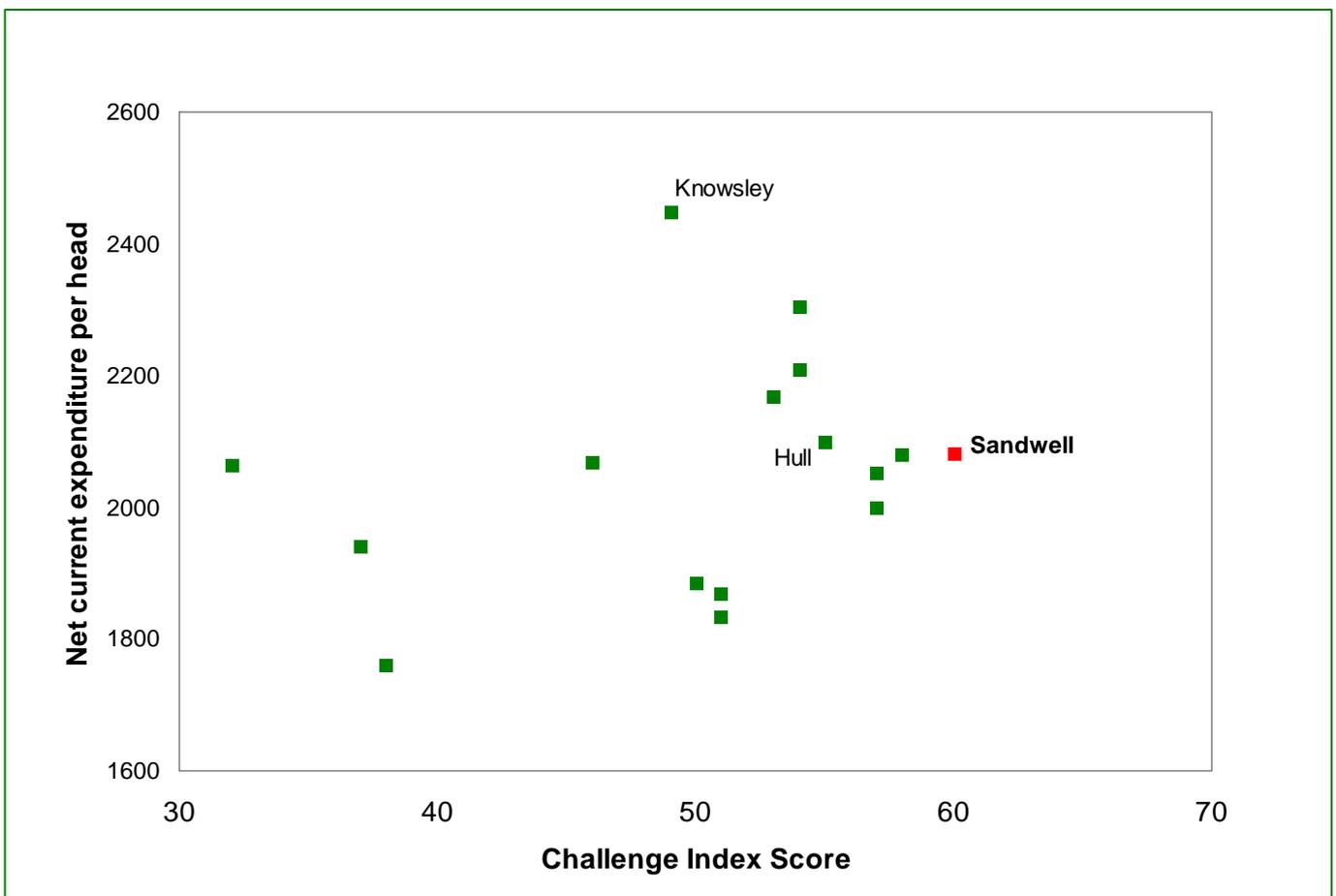
MORI have also calculated some other key expected scores for Sandwell. On NI 1, we are performing better than could be expected based on current conditions. However, in terms of satisfaction with the council (BV3) we are slightly under-performing, and on NI 4 (influencing decisions) there is a gap of 4 percentage points in what Sandwell is actually achieving and what could potentially be achieved.

Table 4. Actual & Predicted Scores for Key NI's

| Sandwell | Predicted Score | Actual Score | Gap |
|--|-----------------|--------------|-----|
| NI 1: % who agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together | 62 | 65 | 3 |
| NI 4: % who agree that they can influence decisions in their local area | 30 | 26 | -4 |
| BV3: Satisfaction with how the council runs things | 38 | 37 | -1 |

Of course, an area can have significant challenges, but if it is given resources to deal with these then we would still expect them to perform well. Therefore, MORI have compared their Area Challenge Index with spending per head by the local council – and there is indeed a strong relationship between challenges and resources, particularly in single-tier authorities. That is, there is a close relationship between how hard the Index says an area is to work in order to achieve positive perceptions and how much money they have to spend.

Graph 1. Challenge Index Scores compared with Local Authority Spending for Sandwell's Statistical Neighbours



The graph on the previous page shows the relationship between spending per head of population⁴ and the Challenge Index, for Sandwell and its CIPFA neighbours. It is clear from this that Sandwell is not able to spend as much per head of population as is perhaps necessary given the challenges that we face. A number of our neighbours with lower Challenge Indices are in a position to spend similar or higher amounts per head than we are as an authority.

We can also see from the graph that Knowsley's high NI 5 performance may be partly explained by greater availability of resources. Kingston upon Hull also looks interesting, as it is only slightly less challenged than Sandwell and has similar resources, but far exceeds its predicted NI 5 score.

But there are things we can do...

While MORI's models show that variations in local perceptions can be explained by background characteristics, they have taken their analysis further to pick out themes in what can be done. There are five key messages from looking across areas as a whole:

1. **Local services really matter to a sense of place:** one of the key findings is how strongly related satisfaction with local services seems to be with overall views of the area and other key outcomes. Of course, cause and effect is not possible to prove, but the data does back up the intuitive sense that services (and councils in particular) have a key place-shaping role.
2. **Understanding and targeting local priorities:** the data confirms that taking visible action on key concerns is vital. The more people feel that their priorities drive local improvement, the better perceptions are of local public service providers. This should not be news, but the key is how authorities act on it.
3. **Communicating what we're doing – and proactively seeking views:** local services still do not get the credit for local improvements – and this is largely due to a communications gap. Those who are rated highly on their communications do better in overall perceptions. Again, although it is not possible to prove cause and effect, it remains the case that **no** authorities that are rated well on communications are rated poorly overall. Similarly, there are clear signs that the biggest impact on perceptions of influence (another key NI) would not be actions that involve a small number of people very deeply, but rather better communications that reach a much wider group. But, it is not just about information provision – there is a clear theme around seeking out views and acting as a result of seeking those views. This is particularly pertinent to crime and ASB. The areas that are seen as doing best are also seen to be proactively looking for feedback. What this means is that partnerships need to examine their respective communications and engagement programmes and look to agree on, and co-ordinate key messages about how effectively they are addressing local priorities and how they want to listen more.
4. **Parenting and respect:** the feeling that local people treat each other with respect, and, related to this, that parents have good disciplinary control over their children, come out as important to a number of key outcomes. Coupled with the large increase in the number of outcomes that seem to be related to the proportion of young people in an area, a focus on young people and family/parental support seems likely to yield particular dividends in resident satisfaction.

⁴ Source: CIPFA Finance and General Statistics 2008-09



5. **Targeting individual neighbourhoods:** finally, the MORI report outlines some initial findings from their new mapping tool – the National Indicators Mapping Application (NIMA). This is a new approach to mapping perceptions that does not rely on official geographies, but rather groups residents to give “contour maps” that show real patterns of opinion. This can show pockets of concern that might be lost when analysing results by collections of wards – MORI say it is a waste of the potential power of the Place Survey not to look for local variation within local authority areas.

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Updated January 2010



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