

Putting consumers at the heart of public services

This wave of research looks at how satisfied people are with public services and what people expect from them; perceptions about how public services deal with complaints; public sector employees' attitudes towards their employers and how these differ from the private sector; and what qualities people think providers of public services need.

Background

On 9 February, Cabinet Office Minister Ian McCartney announced a new consumer focus for public services. The aim is to encourage services to be more responsive to users, with a focus on building consumers' views into an organisation's planning process and how the quality of service delivery is improved as a result.

As part of the initiative, we have used the People's Panel to measure consumer satisfaction with and expectations of key public services. The aim of this research is to:

- track how satisfaction with public services has changed since 1998;
- look at what the public expect from these services; and
- set a baseline for future tracking of attitudes to public services.

Key new targets for public services to measure, and put strategies in place to respond to, consumer' views will be agreed as part of the Spending Review 2000.

It is important to note that any changes since 1998 that fall in the range of +/-3% are within the margin of error for the full sample of 1,086 respondents and that results for sub-groups (e.g. council house tenants) are subject to larger margins of error, which need to be considered when looking at results.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes, and data are weighted to the known profile of the population.

Overview

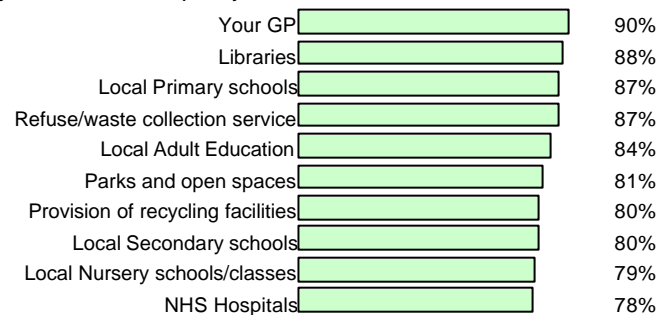
Satisfaction with public services

As in 1998, education, health services, libraries, and

refuse and recycling facilities achieve the highest levels of satisfaction among users.

Satisfaction (top ten services)

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the quality of...



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All service users or members of their household

Those services showing the highest levels of dissatisfaction are road and pavement maintenance (46% and 43%), council housing (30%), street cleaning (27%), youth clubs and facilities for young people (24%) and local councils as a whole (24%).

In many cases, the attitudes of Panel members to public services are broadly unchanged since 1998. But there have been some notable changes:

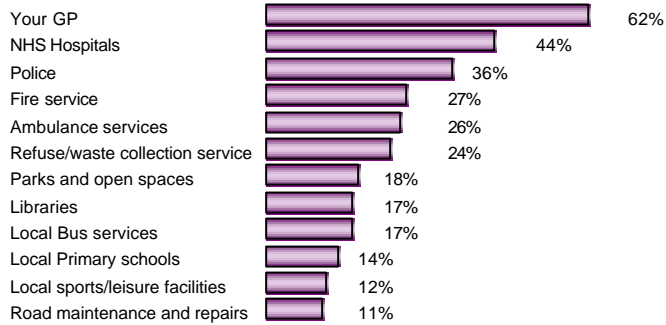
- Satisfaction with local adult education and train companies has increased by 7% and 5% respectively.
- Satisfaction with the Inland Revenue has decreased by 7%.
- Dissatisfaction has increased with youth clubs and other facilities for young people (12% more dissatisfied), their local council (5%), and local sports/leisure facilities (5%).
- Both the police and council housing services have seen falls in satisfaction and rises in dissatisfaction.

Service importance

Panel members say that health services are the most important to them and their household, followed by the police and emergency services, and refuse collection. Other services mentioned as important by more than one in ten include parks and open spaces, libraries, local bus services, local primary schools, local sports and leisure services, and road maintenance and repairs.

Service importance

Services mentioned by more than one in ten respondents



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

Frequency of use

The five services used most frequently by Panel members are:

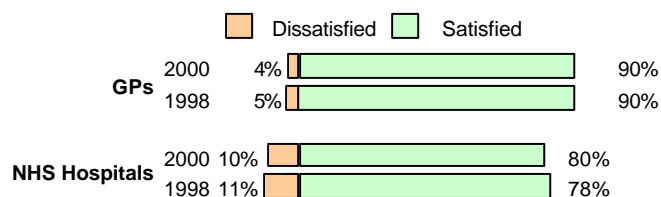
- recycling facilities – used by nearly three in five (58%) Panel members at least once a month;
- parks and open spaces – used by a similar number (55%) at least once a month;
- local bus services – used by just under half (48%) of Panel members at least once a month;
- libraries – used by over two in five (44%) at least once a month; and
- local sports and leisure facilities – used by a third (35%) of Panel members at least once a month.

Health services

Nine in ten (90%) Panel members say they are satisfied with their GP and nearly eight in ten (78%) with NHS hospitals – this is similar to the satisfaction rating given in 1998.

Satisfaction with Health Services

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the quality of...



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

When asked to choose from a list, access to health services are the top priorities for Panel members: three in five (62%) expect to see a GP within a week; over half say hospitals should provide a bed to all who need one (56%), provide medical care when needed (55%) and limit A&E waiting times to no more than one hour (54%).

On 27 July, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health announced publication of the NHS Plan: a Plan for investment in the NHS with sustained increases in funding. The NHS Plan sets out far reaching reforms which will result in direct improvements for patients. For example, patients will see waiting times for treatment cut as extra staff are recruited:

- by 2004 patients will be able to have a GP appointment within 48 hours and there will be up to 1,000 specialist GPs taking referrals from fellow GPs
- long waits in accident and emergency departments will be ended; and
- by the end of 2005 the maximum waiting time for an outpatient appointment will be three months and for inpatients, six months.

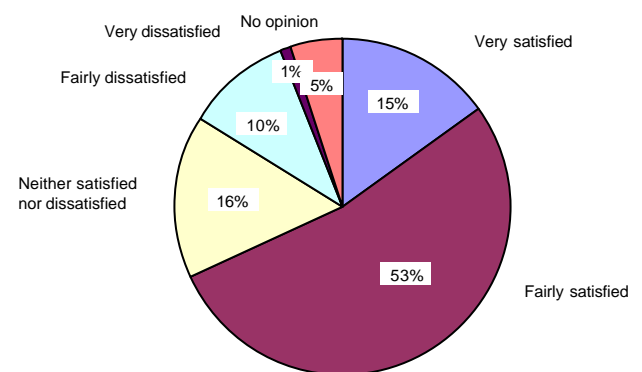
Benefits and Employment

Benefits Agency

Seven in ten (68%) Benefits Agency (BA) users are satisfied with the service they receive. One in ten (11%) are dissatisfied. Satisfaction is highest among Panel members in social classes DE.

Satisfaction with Benefits Agency/DSS

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with ...the Benefits Agency/Dept of Social Security (DSS)



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All service users (273)

BA users prioritise aspects of the service that focus on ease and clarity of use. Over half (55%) say that clearly telling claimants what they are entitled to is the most important thing that the Agency should be doing.

1999 saw the completion of the Customer Service Action Plan, which took account of the results of previous surveys, as well as direct input from customers and their representatives. The Plan includes a number of wide ranging initiatives to improve service delivery.

Employment Service

Three in five (60%) of those who have contacted the Employment Service over the last year are satisfied with the quality of the service they received. One in ten (12%) are dissatisfied.

Users naturally see the key role for the Employment Service as helping people find a job, mentioned by over half (56%). Other top concerns are helping people with forms and paperwork (45%) and clearly telling people what their rights and responsibilities are (42%).

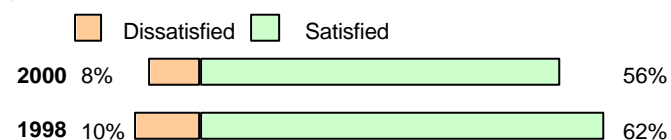
The Government recently announced an Employment Opportunities Fund, worth £875 million in 2001-02 and increasing to £1.4 billion by 2003-04, to extend policies which have delivered the lowest rates of unemployment and highest rates of employment for over 20 years, allowing the ONE service to be delivered by the new working age agency, providing a one-stop shop for benefits and employment advice; and enhancement of the New Deal to improve opportunities for the long-term unemployed.

Inland Revenue

Over half (55%) of users are satisfied with the quality of the service they receive from the Inland Revenue, with under one in ten (8%) dissatisfied: a slight deterioration in the number satisfied since 1998.

Satisfaction with the Inland Revenue

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with ...the Inland Revenue



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All service users (506)

Users consider the most important issues for the Inland Revenue are calculating people's tax right first time (mentioned by half). Two in five (38%) users also consider it important that forms are easy to complete, and a third (35%) say people should be treated fairly and objectively.

Revolutionising the way we pay tax by offering services on-line by 2005 is one of the commitments outlined in the Spending Review 2000 for the Chancellor's departments. Improving the quality of forms and guidance will be a major programme of work for the Inland Revenue (IR) over the next 3-4 years. IR will measure whether or not they have succeeded in delivering this through customer surveys.

Passport Agency

Seven in ten (71%) users of the Passport Agency are satisfied with the service they receive, just under one in ten (8%) are dissatisfied.

Users consider the biggest priority for the Passport Agency is to provide passports within two weeks of receiving an application, mentioned by seven in ten (71%) of users, while half (47%) cite the importance of providing forms that are easy to fill in.

The Agency is currently processing over 96% of properly completed applications within two weeks.

The Courts

Only 6% of Panel members have contacted the courts over the last 12 months, so these findings should be treated with caution and taken as indicative. Nearly half (49%) of users are satisfied with the service, compared with one in six (15%) who are dissatisfied.

Users see the most important priorities for the courts as dealing with cases quickly (51%) and competently (54%), to be in touch with 'real life' (46%) and to explain procedures fully (45%).

The Lord Chancellor's and Attorney General's Departments will help ensure that the Government continues to improve the delivery of justice by a number of measures, including:

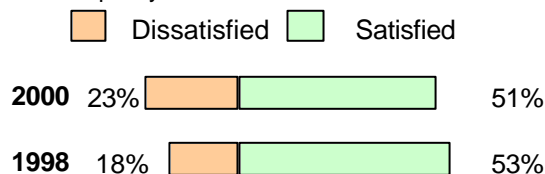
- improving the service provided by courts through the installation of modern IT systems and improved facilities. Information will be more readily available at courts and steps will be taken to ensure that civil judgements will be more enforceable;
- continuing to improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice system by reducing the delays between charge and disposal for all defendants and improving the presentation of cases in court; and
- increasing the satisfaction of the users of the justice system, especially that of jurors, victims and witnesses.

Local councils

Just over half (51%) of Panel members are satisfied with their local council. A quarter (23%) are dissatisfied.

Satisfaction with local councils

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the quality of...



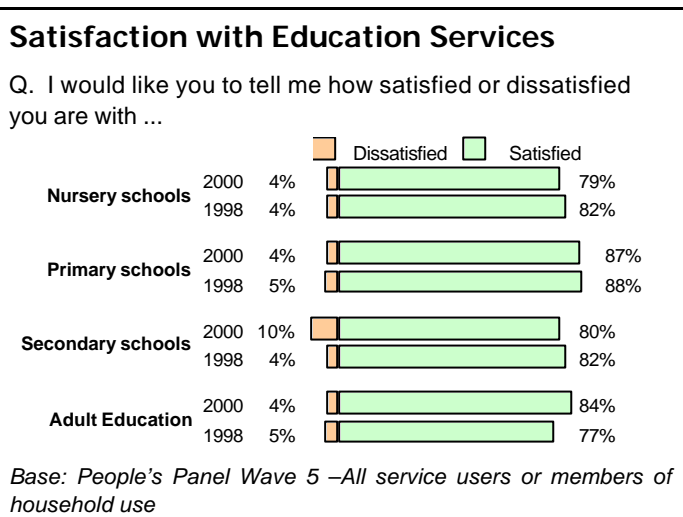
Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

Panel members consider the highest priority for a council is to maintain good quality local services (mentioned by half – 49%). Listening to local people and involving them in the way the council spends their money is also important to around one in three (33% and 30% respectively).

Under the Best Value regime put in place from April this year, all local authorities will collect and publish performance information which will allow people to see how their council is doing compared with others.

Education

As in 1998, overall education services receive some of the highest satisfaction ratings from their users. Adult education receives the only significant change with a rise in satisfaction of 6%.



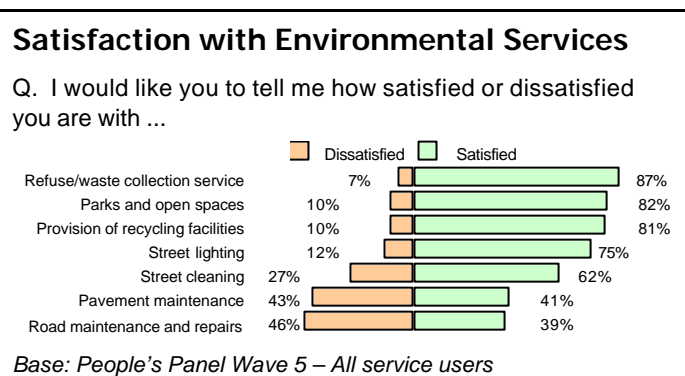
When asked about expectations for education:

- for local nursery schools, users focus on safety and personal development (cited by 62% of respondents), rather than specific measurable targets for educational achievement (44%);
- while still saying that a safe and healthy school environment is one of the most important tasks for primary schools (mentioned by 51%), users' top expectation for primary schools is that by the time children are 11, they should have reached the Maths and English standards for their age. This is mentioned by three in five users (57%);
- when asked to consider what it is most important for local secondary schools to do, almost three in five users (56%) mention 'to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to realise their full potential and that targets for educational attainment are met';
- the main expectation users have for local adult education services is that they should provide courses people want to study (68%).

Demanding new standards are to be set in secondary schools. Subject to consultation, 85% of pupils aged 14 should by 2007 achieve the required standard for English, Maths and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), 80% in science. This compares, for example, with 64% in English and 62 per cent in Maths in 1999. Minimum targets will be set for children aged 11, 14 and 16 in order to narrow the attainment gap between those at risk of falling behind and the standards they should reach. For example, at least 38% of pupils in every Local Education Authority will achieve five A*-C grade GCSEs or better by 2004.

Environmental Services

Environmental services are generally well rated, especially refuse and waste collection, parks and open spaces, provision of recycling facilities and street lighting. Views are mixed over street cleaning (three in five (62%) satisfied, and three in ten (28%) dissatisfied) while road and pavement maintenance receive the worst scores for any service, with more people dissatisfied than satisfied.



Users say that the most important priority for parks is for them to be kept clean and tidy (seven in ten) and for them to be safe (especially important to Panel members with children). More than two in five (45%) think there should be separate areas for dogs. Users expect recycling services to provide for a broad range of household waste (69%), to be easily accessible and to provide door-to-door collection (both 45%). The top priority for refuse collection is for it to be picked up at regular times, and to avoid leaving any mess. Perhaps unsurprisingly, frequent cleaning is the most important priority for street cleaning services, as well as providing enough litter bins. The top priorities for road and pavement maintenance are to ensure an even surface (mentioned by half). Forty-seven per cent of respondents also think it is important to co-ordinate road works with gas, electricity, cable and telephone companies.

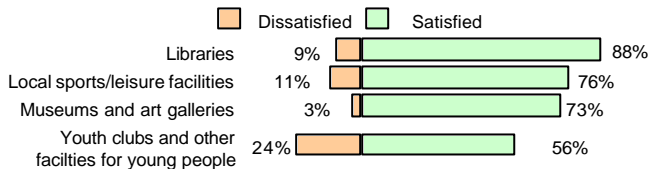
Leisure Services

Among users, libraries are the most highly rated leisure service in terms of importance and satisfaction (nearly nine in ten (88%) satisfied). Just over half (56%) of those who use youth clubs and other facilities for young people (or who have other household members who use them) are satisfied with

the service they provide. But a quarter are dissatisfied.

Satisfaction with Leisure Services

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with ...



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All service users

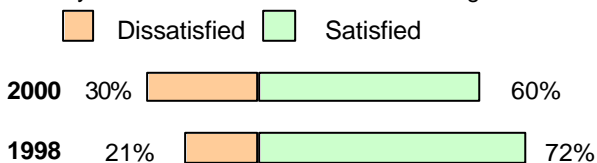
Nearly four in five (78%) users see stocking a wide range of books as the most important priority for library services, and a third want to see extended opening hours. According to users, the biggest priority facing museums and art galleries is to provide interesting exhibitions that tie in with the history of the local area. Safety is the most important issue facing sports and leisure facilities, along with providing a broad range of facilities, and being easily accessible. Users want youth clubs to provide a wide range of interesting activities (mentioned by seven in ten). Having somewhere to go in their spare time is the most important issue for users aged 16-24.

Council Housing Service

Three in five (60%) service users are satisfied with the service, and three in ten (30%) dissatisfied. Since 1998, satisfaction has fallen by 13 points and dissatisfaction has risen by nine points. Despite a very small base, this does suggest a real shift in attitude. Larger surveys such as the DETR Survey of English Housing also show a decline (albeit less marked, and with a higher level of satisfaction).

Satisfaction with Council Housing Services

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your local authorities council housing service



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All service users (168)

Just over half (53%) of service users say that the most important priority for council housing is to carry out repairs to a sufficient quality so that they are only needed once. Over two in five (44%) say repairs should be dealt with quickly, and a third (35%) want the service to be understanding and to listen to complaints.

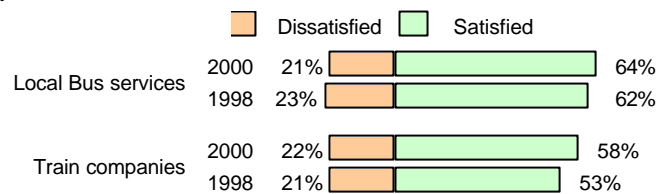
Spending on housing is planned to grow by an average 12 per cent in real terms each year, with spending in 2003-04 £1.6 billion higher than now. This will mean an extra half a million homes modernised by 2004 and twice as many families helped into home ownership as well as an improved supply of social housing in high demand areas.

Transport

Two-thirds of bus travellers are satisfied with the service provided (one in five - 21% - are dissatisfied) while three in five train passengers are satisfied (one in five - 22% - are dissatisfied). The proportion of people satisfied with train companies has risen over the last two years, and the proportion satisfied with local bus services is broadly the same.

Satisfaction with Transport Services

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with ...



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 - All service users (630 bus service users, 611 train service users)

Users consider that the most important priority for public transport is to make sure that buses and trains run on time (mentioned by four in five bus users (77%) and nine in ten (87%) train users). Around two in five think that it is important to provide buses and trains when people need them. While safety is more of an issue for train users (34% vs 28% of bus travellers), two in five (40%) bus users think it is important to provide buses where people need them, compared with one in five (18%) of train users who think that about trains.

On 20 July, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced a ten year plan for transport which set out a £180bn investment package to modernise the nation's transport system, to cut congestion and deliver real choice. As part of the package:

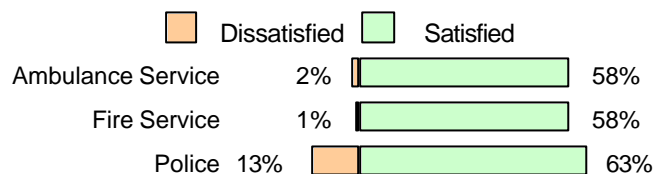
- bus services will be improved across the country, including more flexible transport services for people in rural areas;
- the train fleet will be modernised, with reliable, faster, safer and more frequent services; and
- there will be up to 25 new light rail lines in major cities.

Police and emergency services

Almost three in five (59%) people say they are satisfied with the fire and ambulance service. This is a relatively large drop since 1998 (when they were asked about together) when four in five (78%) said they were satisfied. But this is due to more people responding 'don't know' than saying they are dissatisfied (this remains at only 1%).

Satisfaction with Police & Emergency Services

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the quality of...

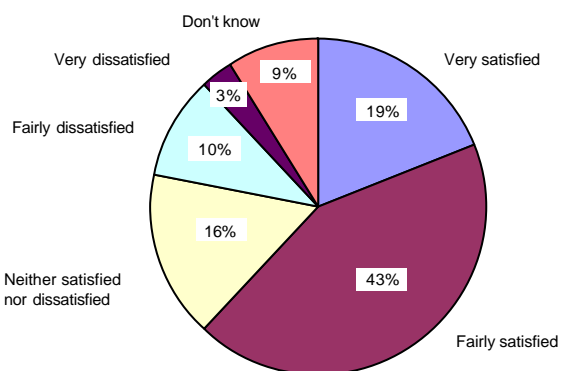


Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

Satisfaction with the police has also dropped since 1998: from seven in ten (73%) to six in ten (62%). As with the fire and ambulance service, this is largely due to more people responding 'don't know'. But dissatisfaction with the police has risen by 3%.

Satisfaction with Police

Q. I would like you to tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with ...the Police?



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

Panel members have clear expectations of fire and ambulance services. More than nine in ten say ambulances should be able to reach victims within 15 minutes, and that fire services should respond to 999 calls within 10 minutes. To be able to deal with all medical emergencies is also an important priority for both services (mentioned by over eight in ten respondents).

The latest Audit Commission report for 1998-99 shows:

- fire service performance in responding to fire calls has improved
- response rates to over 96% of fire calls in England and Wales met the national standards

Again, like the fire and ambulance services, a quick response time is the public's highest priority for the police, followed by reducing crime (70% and 64% respectively). Police patrols are more important to older Panel members, while younger respondents place a higher priority on treating all groups in society equally and without discrimination.

The Spending Review 2000 provides extra funding to tackle crime and improve performance. This extra investment is linked to the achievement of targets to reduce the key recorded crime categories of:

- vehicle crime by 30% by 2004;
- domestic burglary by 25%, with no local authority area having a rate more than three times the national average, by 2005;
- robbery in our principal cities by 14% by 2005.

Complaints Handling

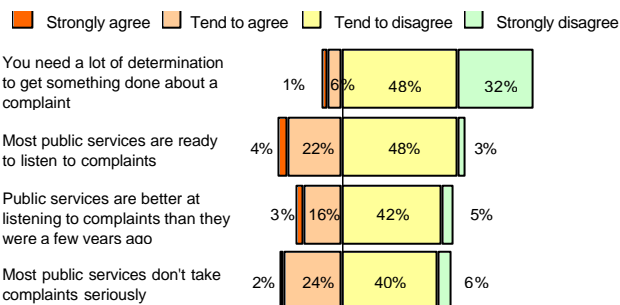
We also looked at perceptions about how well public services deal with complaints. The results suggest that, although there is a slow improvement, public services still have some way to go in improving the way they handle complaints. This is often the first direct contact a member of the public will have with a service, and can have an important impact on their perceptions of the service.

Consistent with the 1998 findings at the recruitment stage of the People's Panel, the top three services respondents complain about are their local council (12%), the police (4%) and council housing services (4%).

A third of those who have made a complaint in the last year were satisfied with the way in which the complaint was handled, and nearly three in five (56%) were dissatisfied.

Complaints Handling

Q. Please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each...



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

Respondents were asked a number of statements about the way in which public services handle complaints, and their experience of making a complaint. Four in five agree that you need a lot of determination to get something done about a complaint. This high level of agreement has changed little since 1998, and remains similar to results from surveys on complaints handling carried out in 1994 and 1997.

Half feel that public services are ready to listen to complaints (51%). In contrast, almost half say that public services do not take their complaints seriously (46%).

On balance, respondents are positive that public services are better at listening to complaints than

they were a few years ago. Almost half agree with this statement, and one in five disagree.

Other Research

Public sector employment

The People's Panel was used to compare public sector employees' views of their employer with those of Panel members working in the private sector. The research shows there is little or no difference between public or private sectors employees in areas such as job satisfaction and attitudes towards employers.

Public Leadership

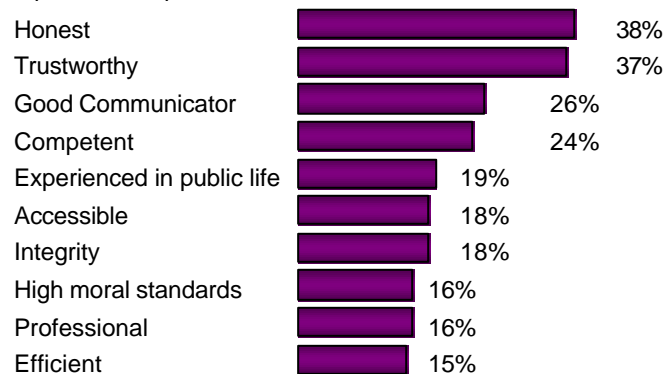
We also asked about the qualities people think are needed for providers of public services.

Local councillors are most likely to be seen as being in charge of public services in the local area (mentioned by 66%), followed by senior managers in public services (36%). Local councillors are also thought to have most influence over issues that affect local people.

In contrast, national politicians are seen as being in charge of public services in the UK, followed by civil servants (65% and 35%, respectively). Younger Panel members are more likely to identify national politicians. Older respondents are more likely to mention civil servants – possibly reflecting differences in comprehension of how central government works.

Personal Qualities in Public Leaders

Q. Which three of these qualities, if any, do you feel are most important in a public leader?



Base: People's Panel Wave 5 – All (1,086)

The most important qualities for national politicians are seen as honesty, trustworthiness and being a good communicator. Honesty and trustworthiness are also the most important qualities for local councillors, although accessibility is seen as more important for them than national politicians (26% and 14%, respectively). Efficiency, competence and honesty are seen as the most important skills for civil servants.

Deprived Areas

The Social Exclusion Unit commissioned a re-analysis of the data from the first wave of the People's Panel to examine the attitudes of respondents who lived in deprived areas, compared with those living in non-deprived areas (defined using ACORN codes).

The analysis highlights some interesting differences in patterns of service use and in attitudes to public services in deprived and non-deprived areas. It also indicates differences in attitudes between different demographic groups in each.

But little firm evidence was found to suggest that residents in deprived areas are less satisfied with public services in general than those in the rest of England.

The full report can be found on the People's Panel web site (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst) or is available from the Social Exclusion Unit. Contact Sasha McFarquhar, tel: 020 7276 2902, e-mail: sasha.mcfarquhar@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk.



The full reports and topline results for the research summarised in this newsletter are available on the People's Panel website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst)

Additional copies of the Summary of Results are available from the Service First Publications Line: 08457 22 32 42

What is the People's Panel

What is the People's Panel?

The People's Panel is based on 5,000 adults, aged 16 and over. It has a profile that is representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender, region and a wide range of other demographic indicators. MORI recruited the Panel from a random sample of addresses across the UK between June and September 1998. At the time of recruitment, data on both service usage and attitudes were collected for each Panel member and their household.

The original members of the Panel were recruited during summer 1998. Since then we have carried out two top-up recruitment exercises to replace 1,000 members. Also, between November 1999 and January 2000, MORI recruited an additional 830 Panel members from ethnic minority communities.

The Modernising Government White Paper, published on 30 March, sets out a programme for transforming the way government works for people. A key commitment given in the White Paper is to make public services more responsive. That is, services that meet the needs of people, not the convenience of service providers. To achieve this, government needs to know more about what people want and consult and work with people rather than impose solutions. The People's Panel has a very important part to play in finding out what people really think about their public services and our attempts to make them better.

The White Paper can be downloaded from the Cabinet Office website:

www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/moderngov/1999/whitepaper/index.htm

Benefits of using the People's Panel

One major benefit of the Panel is that it is a cost-effective means of identifying representative groups of service users. For example, the Panel can be used to find a representative sample of people who visit libraries every week. You can also access the views of non-users of specific services if, say, you want to find out why they choose not to use that service.

The Panel is also an ideal vehicle to consult on cross-sectoral issues, such as those concerning health, housing and social services.

The Panel offers a unique opportunity to understand how individuals' views are changing - and the reasons behind this - by tracking views over time. Only a Panel can reliably provide this type of information. We are currently using it to look at changing attitudes between 1998-2000.

The Panel is a cost-effective method of conducting a range of surveys, providing benchmark data and comparable national data.

Who can use the People's Panel?

Any government department, Next Steps agency, NDPB, or any other publicly funded body, local authority, or association representing these organisations can use the People's Panel (on a payment basis).

Future waves of research

The Cabinet Office plan to carry out three waves of quantitative research a year, normally during March/April, August/September and December/January.

Further information

If you would like further information about the People's Panel, or want to discuss in more detail how you can use it, in the first instance you should contact either:

Tony Singleton Tel: 020 7276 1730

e-mail: tsingleton@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

or

Paul Greening Tel: 020 7276 1729

e-mail: pgreening@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

who are managing the Panel, at the Modernising Public Services Group, Cabinet Office, Admiralty House, The Mall, London SW1A 2WH (Fax: 020 7276 1705).

SPSS data on disk are available from MORI (www.mori.com). Please contact either **Ben Page** or **Jessica Elgood** at MORI, 95 Southwark Street, London SE1 0HX (Tel: 020 7928 5955, fax: 020 7955 0070. e-mail: peoples.panel@mori.com).

Technical Notes

- 1,086 interviews were conducted with People's Panel members between 18 March and 3 April 2000. Of these, some 844 had been on the Panel since 1998, with some 242 who were recruited more recently.
- The results have been weighted to the profile of all adults in the UK.

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