Quality of life

A good practice guide to communicating quality of life indicators
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Introduction

The Local Government Act 2000 granted local authorities the power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their community and charged them with producing a community strategy on how to improve quality of life in their local area. Most have set up Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) to develop this strategy. During 2001/02, the Audit Commission co-ordinated a national pilot exercise with 90 local councils and a few LSPs to develop and test a set of quality of life indicators, designed to monitor the effectiveness of these community strategies.

In September 2002, the Commission published *Using Quality of Life Indicators*, which reported on the pilot and recommended a good practice set of quality of life indicators, which were endorsed by four government departments and six national organisations. One of the major issues raised by the pilot authorities was the need for guidance on how to communicate quality of life indicators to the public. This guidance has been written by Sarah McMahon of Bristol City Council while on secondment to the Audit Commission to work on the quality of life indicators project.

The guidance has been included on the website of the Communicating with Communities Project (CwC), jointly run by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA).

The case studies in this publication are from a varied selection of councils and organisations that have demonstrated how they have published and communicated their quality of life indicators to local communities.

The quotations included are extracts from comments made by participants at two MORI focus groups which, as well as discussing the concept of ‘quality of life’, also discussed how councils should communicate quality of life indicators. These groups were held in Chapel Brampton, Northamptonshire and in Walthamstow in October 2001.
Why communicate and publish quality of life indicators?

- The public has a right to know what action is being taken to address and improve their local environment and to tackle local issues.
- Quality of life indicators reflect the ‘livability’ of a local area and the values of the public. Publication of such indicators will be of wide interest and will help to engage the public and promote debate.
- Indicators can raise awareness about local sustainable development and quality of life and provide a basis for action to change and improve things that concern local people. They can also motivate individuals and communities to make sustainable choices.
- Indicators can help to facilitate change. Greater support for changes and new initiatives can be gained if information about the current situation and the need for local action by local authority partnerships is widely available.
- Quality of life indicators can support community strategies, where they can help to inform, monitor and evaluate these strategies over the long term. By publishing indicators these strategies can be accessible to the public.
- A quality of life publication should aim to pull together information from a number of sources and agencies. It is easier for people to find out more about their local area if they can see the ‘bigger picture’ and see beyond those services that their council provides. MORI has considerable evidence that local people are frequently not aware of, nor do they particularly care about, who exactly provides different services. Generally, they are also not interested in apportioning blame to individual agencies when these services are poor: they probably just want them to be sorted out, by all of the agencies, whoever is responsible. In any event, in MORI’s experience, there is some confusion in the public mind about which services are provided by which council/other public body.
Know your audience

- Your organisation needs to be clear, and realistic, about who it is targeting this information at – the public, stakeholders, experts or all three? Choose the right pitch for your target audience. It makes sense that any publication should be able to reach a wide sector of society. Consider what message your publication aims to give – what needs to be included and what can be left out?

- Use plain English, avoid jargon and spin. Use the Fog index to check the readability of the publication. This index is often used by the press and involves a calculation that emphasises word difficulty and sentence length. It is based on the assumption that 75 per cent of UK residents have a reading age of between eight and eleven years and will be able to understand text containing short sentences with few words of three or more syllables. Information should be presented using appropriate language, without oversimplification.

- Remember the communication gap – only 10 – 20 per cent of your audience is likely to be interested, so the publication needs to grab the attention. Or perhaps it could be designed to have another use, for example, as a calendar [Case study 1].

- Don’t forget ‘hard-to-reach’ groups and include a help-line for people who need information in a larger print, or who need it to be translated.

Case study 1

Dorset County Council has published a Quality of Life calendar. It contains 12 indicators, one for each month, including a brief summary of each indicator’s performance, a section on ‘what you can do’, plus useful contact points for further information. This form of publication has been funded partly by sponsors and has proved to be very popular with residents. For further details contact m.a.simons@dorsetcc.gov.uk

Source: Dorset County Council
Types of publication

MORI interviewer: What about the type of presentation, how do you think they [councils] should publish indicators?

Residents: If the publication is too long-winded I would not read it and think ‘what a waste of money that was’. If the publication is shorter and brighter you might just read it if you were bored.

If they didn’t want to print so many they could have them in the post office, or places like that, and people who wanted to know could go and get one.

Publications aimed at the public

- Avoid glossy, ‘expensive looking’ and weighty publications that are costly to produce but will be read by few.
- Make use of leaflets/fliers to summarise a more detailed publication. You may wish to consider a popularised version of the community strategy focusing on the indicators and their trends as the public can engage easily with such documents. Those people who are interested can then request the full report [Case study 2].
- Publish a version on the council website. Almost 50 per cent of the public has access to the internet and links can be included to other agencies and sources of information.
- Publish in the local press and get the media on board. Take advantage of its wide readership – many local residents get most of their information about the council and the local area in this way and may prefer one source of news.

Publications aimed at experts, stakeholders and managers

- Provide an electronic version that can be emailed easily for greater access, particularly useful when different sections will be relevant to different stakeholders and policymakers.
- A detailed community strategy will be necessary for local strategic partnerships as a work book, and quality of life indicators can be included within the section ‘monitoring progress of the strategy’.
- Publish regularly/annually: make your publication an up-to-date living, document rather than a ‘snapshot’, and track indicator trends to monitor policies.
- Provide access to the raw data that supports the indicators for greater transparency.
- Combine quality of life indicators, wherever appropriate, with other publications (for example, annual reports, A-Z of services, annual best value performance plans, council tax leaflets and so on).

Case study 2

South Gloucestershire’s most recent publication on quality of life indicators is a 16-page colour booklet. The council recently reduced the size of its publication by including a smaller selection of indicators, to enable greater circulation and a more accessible document. It contains many local photographs and graphics that can be easily understood. Contact details are included for those who seek further detail on more indicators. See www.southglos.gov.uk

Source: South Gloucestershire Council
What to include in a publication

MORI interviewer: What sort of quality of life indicators would you be interested in seeing and reading about?

Resident: Crime figures, education, health, transport and environment. In some ways I would prefer if the statistics had absolutely nothing to do with the council.

Each council should have the same standard set of indicators so issues are not left out.

Which indicators and issues

- Use a balanced set of sustainability indicators (social, economic and environmental) that show the whole picture. Don’t ‘cherry pick’ or ‘greenwash’ by just reporting on the things that the council, the Local Strategic Partnership and other organisations do well.

- Include indicators that drive and influence sustainable development policy and strategic planning [Case studies 3 and 4].

- Complement a local set of indicators with those from the national Audit Commission set of quality of life indicators (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/qol/) to allow comparisons with other similar authorities [Case study 4].

Describe what the indicators show

- Say why an indicator has been chosen – its relevance and the rationale for its use.

- Describe what the indicator level shows and what the indicator trend, if any, means. Explain if things are getting better, worse, staying the same or if it is too early to tell.

- Include targets, if appropriate, and describe the indicator position in relation to the target figure.

- Describe some indicators with a demographic analysis (to show indicator level split by male, female, ethnic minorities, and so on) to address concerns about social inclusion.

- Why not combine indicators in an overall index of quality of life or sustainability? This could be used to show whether the local partners are moving in the right direction.
Action to improve things

- Ensure that you include what action is being taken by the local authority and its partners to address the indicator trend.
- Consider suggesting what action could be taken by partners and by the public to ‘improve’ this indicator for the future.

Further information

- Don’t forget to say where the information comes from and include sources and contact points. If reporting survey results then include the sample size and date of the survey [Case study 3].

Case study 3

Warwickshire County Council has produced an annual quality of life report for the past three years. Its comprehensive report helps to inform policies and local and county-wide community strategies. The Council has sought the views of the six community plan partnerships in the county when choosing indicators. The document has colour-coded sections for economic, social and environmental indicators and uses symbols to help summarise indicator change. All information is sourced with useful websites. See www.warwickshire.gov.uk/qualityoflife

Source: Warwickshire County Council

Case study 4

Liverpool’s Community Strategy: Liverpool First (2002-2005) Workbook includes many of the Audit Commission’s Quality of Life set. The Workbook is produced by the Liverpool Partnership Group and features long-term headline indicators and strategic indicators that are linked with priority actions for the sustainable regeneration of the city. Detailed tables give baselines and targets and show how the strategic indicators are aligned with other national and regional sets. The workbook can be accessed and downloaded at www.liverpoolfirst.org.uk

Source: Liverpool Partnership Group
Make it understandable

MORI interviewer: What type of publication appeals to you?

Resident: It needs to be bright and cheerful and does not look like it’s going to be too complicated and be understandable at a glance.

- Use graphs to explain indicator levels/trends. Take care choosing the scale, shade/colour and legend so as not to distort the figures.
- Try using colour to brighten up blocks of text and colour coding of pages and themes [Case study 3].
- Summarise trends with symbols to help to explain an indicator level or trend, such as:

   ![Symbols](symbol.png)

Remember to explain what your symbols mean, and your criteria for change [Case study 5].

- Illustrate the indicators with photos and sketches to help explain the issues [Case study 6].

Case study 5

Agenda 21 at Coventry has published ‘Indicators for a Sustainable Coventry’, which makes good use of symbols to show graphs and trends. This 24-page booklet is bright and cheerful and can be easily understood. For further information contact agenda21@coventry.gov.uk

Source: Coventry City Council

Case study 6

Restormel Borough Council provides a pocket-sized colour booklet on quality of life. It includes a selection of indicators from the Audit Commission Quality of Life set plus local ones. Each indicator is clearly illustrated by graphs and local photos with symbols to describe trends. See www.restormel.gov.uk for further details.

Source: Restormel Borough Council
Local relevance and mapping

- Include indicators that reflect the unique and local circumstances that characterise the area. Residents will have more ‘buy in’ and an ownership of the information if it is relevant to where they live.
- Maps can bring information to life for the public and for policymakers. Use maps to display information for small areas such as wards, neighbourhoods and census output areas.

Exhibit 1

Index of multiple deprivation 2000 – Bristol

This map illustrates ward deprivation in Bristol.

Case study 7

Bristol City Council has been publishing its indicators of quality of life since 1996 and has historically mapped these indicators by ward, in annual reports that are available to the public. This has led to a high level of community engagement and familiarity, and residents and policymakers have been able to see ward variations. This has highlighted priority wards and helped with preparations for bids for funds for needy areas. See www.bristol-city.gov.uk/qualityoflife

Bristol Evening Post has covered Bristol’s indicators with a double page on ‘home truths’.

Source: Bristol City Council

Try and obtain expertise with GIS (geographical information systems), which are available in most local authorities, and map and analyse figures by postcode, if possible.

Look for links between indicators – it may be possible to analyse the data and test for significant correlations. Understanding and explaining these links may help to find the right solutions to quality of life issues.

Source: Bristol City Council [Case study 7]
Make it believable

Residents: I’m very cynical about the actual parameters being measured because there is usually some motive behind how they measure those things – in terms of getting more money... statistics can mean whatever you want them to mean.

If you could have a benchmark then you could say that this is valid. You could also use a national average.

There ought to be a national standard [set of indicators], exactly the same for each council.

The figures must be believable, it’s no good putting in perceptions. It has got to be an actual figure.

They [the council] would have to stop covering things up all the time and tell people the truth. What would you rather – ten lies or one truth? I would rather hear one truth than ten lies.

• Choose a set of indicators that can allow some comparison against national averages or with other local authorities (such as the Audit Commission quality of life indicators). This can give a contextual background to the information.

• Show trends over time and explain why an indicator is getting better/staying the same/getting worse. Explain with reference to any links between indicators and state how a change in one will affect the level of another.

• Where possible, plot and describe an indicator using quantitative figures alongside qualitative. This may be so for some indicators that require a survey where a perception of a service/issue can be recorded together with the actual level of the service provided. This information can be particularly meaningful if it can be mapped by neighbourhoods. It can also help to focus the local authority and its partners on the things that need to improve.

• Include comments and opinions from the public (including young and older people) collected during surveys, consultation and feedback [Case study 8].

Case study 8

Hertfordshire’s Quality of Life Report 2001, published by its Environmental Forum, is given depth and credibility by not only including ‘Voices from the past’ but also ‘Vision for the future’ with young people’s views and sketches for Hertfordshire in 2012. The report also includes indicator trends with national comparisons. See www.hef.org.uk

Source: Hertfordshire Environmental Forum
Techniques to reduce costs

- Don’t publish large, glossy, full colour volumes if they will be read by only a few, with limited circulation to the general public. Make use of summary leaflets, which are cheaper to produce and can have a widespread distribution with details on how people can access the full report.

- Don’t waste space with pages of minimal print – use good editing practices to reduce volume.

- Consider good quality photocopies that are cheaper and easier to print and to circulate quickly.

- Use recycled paper and other materials and techniques that are sustainable when printing a publication. State that this has been done on the back of the report.

- For publications using colour, choose the colours carefully. With a good choice of graphics a two-colour report can often be just as effective as a full-colour publication, but with reduced printing costs. Fewer colours make information easier to photocopy. Avoid the use of red and green (as a two-colour report), as these colours can cause difficulty for people who are colour blind.

- Use your organisation’s website to provide greater access to information. There is little extra cost involved and full colour is available.

- For indicators that require a household survey reduce costs by combining with other marketing surveys in your local area. This can bring in extra resources to fund a larger survey. Websites can also be used for online surveys.

- Get support from the media and take advantage of ‘free’ publicity about indicators [Case study 7].

- Seek financial support towards publishing and survey costs from sponsors and other agencies [Case study 9].

Case study 9

Dorset County Council has used sponsors to supplement publishing costs. A feature is also included on quality of life indicators in the council’s free newspaper, which is delivered to 200,000 homes. See www.dorsetcc.gov.uk/yourdorset (autumn 2002).

Source: Dorset County Council
Consultation and feedback

- Build in a period of public and stakeholder consultation when the publication is in draft format. Check that you are producing the information that people find valid and useful. Allow enough time for this process.

- Provide an opportunity for feedback on the consultative draft and include a feedback form or questionnaire with the final publication.

- If resources are available use focus groups to check that the publication is meaningful and that it is covering the right issues.

- Publish contact details with any information placed on the website, in printed format or in the press so that local residents do not experience barriers to getting in touch and expressing their views.

- Listen to comments from stakeholders and the public. Make sure that this feedback is acknowledged and that residents are kept informed of the consultation outcomes to demonstrate that their opinion makes a difference. Build in these results, amendments and comments and produce a more inclusive publication. This is critical in order to build trust – people need to know that their views will be listened to and that they will lead to action [Case study 10].

Case study 10

West Devon Environmental Network’s Sustainability Report is a good example of consultation and involvement with the local community. It combines quantitative and qualitative indicators from local surveys and compares trends over the last three years. The report has one page per indicator and includes details on why an indicator has been chosen and what it shows. Trends are summarised with symbols. See www.westden.co.uk for further details.

Source: West Devon Environmental Network
Other useful publications

The following publications also provide useful background and guidance on communicating performance and on the effective use of quality of life performance indicators:


3. *Five years of Communications*, Connecting with Communities toolkit at www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge (ODPM, Free Literature 0870 1226 236).


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