

Rural Services Network  
1<sup>st</sup> Sounding Board Survey Summary

## ‘The impacts of austerity measures on local services’

The Rural Services Network have carried out their first survey using the Sounding Board established this year of Councillors from their Local Authority membership and also Parish Councillors from the Rural Services Community. The same survey was sent to both Sounding Boards so that it would be possible to compare differences in results between the two groups.

Some of the key points are highlighted below:

Q1. Compared to 3 years ago how would you rate current public services?

|                 | Local Authority Councillor Responses | Parish Councillor Responses |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Much Better     | 6.45%                                | 0.32%                       |
| Slightly Better | 32.26%                               | 6.41%                       |
| Unchanged       | 12.90%                               | 22.44%                      |
| Slightly Worse  | 38.71%                               | 56.60%                      |
| Much Worse      | 9.68%                                | 19.23%                      |

There is quite a difference between the Local Authority and Parish Councillor responses to this question. Overall, 76% of responses from Parish Councils felt that current public services had got worse compared to 3 years ago, in contrast to 39% of Local Authority Councillors who felt that they had got better.

Q2 In respect of specific services, how have these changed over the last 3 years?

Full details of these results can be found in the accompanying reports however it is worth noting the following points:

- 36% of Local Authority Councillors felt that recycling services had got much better in the last 3 years compared to only 7% of Parish Councillors.
- 49% of Parish Councillors felt that the Police service had got worse over the last 3 years compared with only 30% of Local Authority Councillors.
- Everyone was generally in agreement about Road Maintenance with 63% of Local Authority Councillors and 77% of Parish Councillors feeling that the service had got worse in the last 3 years.

We also asked respondents whether they were users of the services mentioned in the question previously and there are some points to note:

- Care for the Elderly – The % of respondents who felt that the service had got worse over the last 3 years doubled between all respondents and users of the service for both Parish and Local Authority Councillors. This indicates a difference in the perception and the reality of how the service is received by users and by general members of the public.
- Social Services – This is similar with the % of respondents from Parish Councils with those who felt that the service had got worse over the last 3 years going from 22% overall to 47% amongst users of the service.
- Libraries – overall the perception of the service that had got worse over the last 3 years amongst Parish Councillors was 38% and amongst users of the service was 48%.
- Sport and Leisure Facilities – only 16% of the Parish Councillors that used the service felt that Sports and Leisure Facilities had got better over the last compared to a huge 57% of Local Authority Councillors!

Respondents were asked about any changes in accessibility of services provided by their Local Council in the last 3 years. A large number of negative responses were received to these questions with the impact of cut backs to service provision clearly being felt.

Respondents were asked to note the three most significant impacts of changes in service provision over the last 3 years.

Both Local Authority Councillors and Parish Councillors felt that reductions to bus services and poor road maintenance were key issues to contend with. There was interestingly a comment about the 'handing over of parks and play areas to parishes and communities' and also 'More parish influence on decisions' signalling a change in the way that services are delivered. Positive comments were also received about improvement in refuse and recycling services, despite some areas now having a charge for garden waste collections.

When considering future changes that are due to be implemented these nearly all had a negative connotation to them for example, reduction in opening hours of libraries or fewer dog wardens, concentration of services in urban 'hubs'. However there were a few positive comments around new ways of delivering services and transforming services to improve customer service.

In conclusion, these surveys record a moment in time when it appears that Local Authorities have made efficiencies from back office services and frontline services are starting to change and evolve, often with the results being felt very keenly across rural areas. Repeating the survey in 2 years time will possibly bring results with a greater impact being felt across all services, depending on how innovatively individual councils respond to the challenges of tighter budgets and potential increases in demand for services.