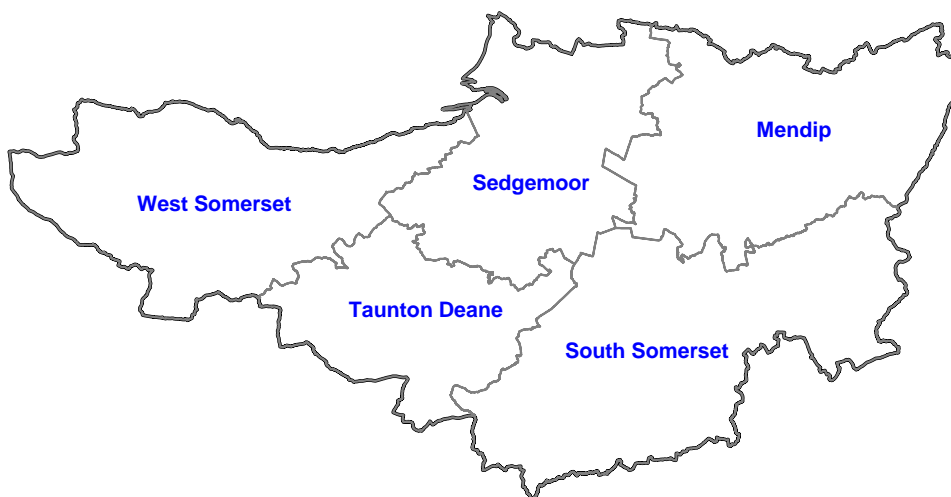


Somerset Says...



Produced by the Intelligence Unit at Somerset County Council

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1. Introduction

The Place Survey is a statutory survey to be carried out across all districts of England every two years. As well as contributing 18 of the National Indicators required by the government's Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), it provides local public organisations with a 'citizen perspective' about many aspects of their local area. This in turn helps inform decisions on improving outcomes for local people and places.

It replaces the Best Value User Satisfaction Survey (BVUSS), last carried out in 2006. Some questions remain the same and, where appropriate, comparisons have been made between the Place Survey and BVUSS.

2. Background and method

Here in Somerset, a consortium of local public service organisations appointed Bostock Marketing Group (BMG) to manage the Place Survey within the county. 17,500 questionnaires were posted to households across Somerset, equally divided between the five districts. Between September and December 2008, a total of 7,284 residents aged 18+ completed the survey, representing a healthy response rate of 42%.

Because the methodology is consistent across the country, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and Audit Commission published headline figures for all local authority areas. This allows us to compare our own results with not only regional or national averages but also specific counties with similar populations or challenges to our own.

Please note that, like any questionnaire, the Place Survey is a snapshot of attitudes and perceptions at one point in time, and these opinions will inevitably be affected by what was happening at that time. For instance, the economy was entering recession and unemployment was starting to rise sharply, which should be borne in mind when interpreting results at both local and national levels.

Detailed data and analysis can be found in a separate report, produced by BMG.

3. What the survey tells us

3.1 Overall headlines

- Somerset residents' satisfaction with their local area has increased since 2006 and is more than 6% points above the England average.
- There have been substantial improvements in perceived personal safety outdoors and anti-social behaviour.
- People in our county are relatively likely to be active members of their community, particularly in doing unpaid voluntary work.
- However, satisfaction with elected local authorities has fallen, albeit in line with national trends. This decline is probably related to the economic downturn, which started to take hold during the period of the survey.
- West Somerset residents tend to think more favourably towards where they live. This could well be linked to the district having a relatively elderly population, as older people tend to have more positive opinions about place and services provided.

3.2 General Impressions

- 86% of residents were very or fairly satisfied with their local area as a place to live (NI 5). This represents an 8% point increase since 2006 and remains above the national norm.
- The proportion of people who are satisfied with the way Somerset County Council and their district council are running things has dipped sharply since the previous survey. However, the drop of around 8% points is in line with the national trend. Across our county as a whole, though, more people are broadly satisfied than dissatisfied.

The rest of this summary is structured around the six Aims of the Sustainable Community Strategy for Somerset

(<http://www.somersetstrategicpartnership.org.uk/community/>).

3.3 Making a Positive Contribution

- This county is one of the best in the country with regard to participation in regular volunteering (NI 6). Three in ten have given unpaid help to a group at least once a month, and around four in ten in the past year.
- Only 28% feel they can influence decisions in their local area (NI 4). This is in line with the national benchmark figure but represents a slight fall since 2006. Even fewer (22%) actually want to be more involved generally, but a further two in three would if motivated by a particular issue. Only two in five felt very or fairly well informed about how to get involved, slightly above average. We need to recognise that not everyone wants to get actively involved in making decisions but that those who want to be empowered should have the information they need.
- Our residents were more likely than average to take part in local decision-making groups such as councils or tenants committees, one in six having done so in the past year (NI 3).
- We were also above the England average for NI 2, with 63% feeling a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood.

3.4 Living Sustainably

- As in 2006, affordable decent housing was ranked third (behind health and low crime) out of twenty services with regard to what is important in making somewhere a good place to live, and fifth for what most needs improving. It had an even higher priority amongst people in West Somerset where house prices remain highest in relation to income.
- Public transport has moved up residents' priorities in terms of importance and it ranks fourth out of twenty for needing improvement. Satisfaction with local bus services is relatively low in Somerset but this is partly explained by usage also being relatively low, even relative to the South West average. Whilst pollution isn't a major issue, traffic congestion is the number one target for improvement in and around Taunton. We also face the challenge of delivering a comprehensive public transport service in a geographically large county with a dispersed population.
- 84% of residents were satisfied with the quality of environment here and more than two in three agreed that local public services were working to make the area cleaner and greener. Satisfaction with, and usage of local recycling centres was very high. Indeed, Sedgemoor had the highest satisfaction figure in the country.
- However, this should be balanced by the relatively low satisfaction with doorstep recycling, although improvements in this service have subsequently been introduced.

3.5 Ensuring Economic Wellbeing

- More than one in four people named job prospects as one of their top services which need improving, compared with fewer than one in five nationally. It was the number one priority in West Somerset, with wage levels and cost of living not far behind, well above even the county average.
- Perhaps also in the light of impending recession and media headlines at the time, barely one in three considered their councils to offer value for money, but this was in line with the national average.

3.6 Enjoying and Achieving

- Almost one in three people said education provision was one of the most important things in making a good place to live, rising much higher amongst those with children. However, very few thought it needed improving.
- As in the previous survey, what residents felt was most in need of improvement was activities for teenagers. However, this should be seen in context of other research in our county which indicates that young people themselves attach higher priority to having more places to hang out together and access to decent shops.
- Access to nature was also considered very important but, with most of our residents living in or close to a rural landscape, few called for improvements.
- Usage of and satisfaction with libraries were above the England norm, but the opposite was true with regard to sport/leisure facilities and facilities such as museums and theatres. Figures were particularly low in West Somerset where people are relatively remote from cultural and leisure amenities.
- More than one in three people thought that older people get the help and support they need to live at home for as long as they want (NI 139). In West Somerset, the figure of 47.9% was the highest in the country, probably an effect of the district having one of the oldest populations in England.

3.7 Staying Safe

- Countywide, low crime remained the single most important service in making somewhere a good place to live, but it is encouraging that fewer people than before prioritised this as most needing improvement.
- There were considerable increases in feelings of personal safety outdoors, after dark in particular. Partnership working was also appreciated, with two in three of our residents agreeing that local services were working together to make the area safer.
- Perceptions of anti-social behaviour (ASB) being a problem locally has also fallen sharply, particularly involving drugs and teenagers hanging around on streets.
- However, only one in four thought police and other services seek people's views about crime and ASB and slightly more (27%) felt them to be successfully dealing with the issues. This is in line with the norm, although South Somerset figures are slightly lower. There seems to be a mismatch between perceived improvements in community safety and recognition for those responsible for this apparent success, an issue which may be addressed by targeted communications and engagement activities.
- We are close to the average with regard to measures on respect and social cohesion. Over three in four respondents thought their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (NI 1) and one in three felt parents take enough responsibility for their children's behaviour (NI 22). Only one in four felt there was a problem with people not treating each other with respect and consideration (NI 23).
- More than four in five people were satisfied with the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, in line with the national norm. Even more (84%) felt the Service provides value for money.

3.8 Being healthy

- Three in four Somerset residents described their health as either good or very good although not surprisingly the proportion decreased with age. Given the rapidly increasing age of our county's population, this could pose greater challenges for delivery and accessibility of public services here in the future.
- Satisfaction with health services were above average. In particular, 85% of people were satisfied with their GP and 80% with their local hospital. Almost three in ten agreed that the local NHS is improving health services.

4. In Conclusion

- The Place Survey results paint a broadly positive portrait of Somerset relative to England as a whole, particularly with regard to satisfaction with the local area, community safety and involvement.
- However, along with other parts of the country, the figures indicate that we face particular challenges in times of economic downturn. For instance, there is scope for improving satisfaction and usage of some public services and addressing people's concerns about job prospects, affordable housing and public transport in a largely rural landscape, whilst maintaining their support in areas of health, education and community safety.
- The next Place Survey is scheduled to take place in 2010 by which time, if most current forecasts are correct, the economy may be on the upturn, although the climate of public sector belt-tightening is likely to continue. The development of partnership working to improve services could have a bearing on how we in Somerset ride out the recession and consequently whether attitudes and perceptions of our residents move in the right direction.