

Could The Place Survey be Fuel for Your Local Strategic Partnership?

The idea of partnership working in a community is a good one, or at least it should be. A number of different agencies or organisations coming together and working together for the common good, what could be better? The theory is that the sum of the parts will be greater than each of the individual parts. This is how it could work, but what about in practice?

The Place Survey due to be introduced later this year (subject to the results of the formal consultation period), is changing the emphasis of measurement away from the performance of individual authorities or individual services within these authorities to measuring the outcomes it and its partners delivers to the area or place it serves.

For some people this change of emphasis of measurement will result in thoughts about what they might lose rather than seeing it as an improvement or opportunity. After all, many authorities have adapted their systems and ways of working to ensure they achieve the best possible survey results.

This is not the only change that is taking place. The National Indicator Set and Local Area Agreements, both of which are designed to be more outcome focused include the Place Survey indicators and these in turn are linked to Sustainable Community Strategies and LSP's.

Over the years we have been working in the public sector we have met numerous Chief Executives and Council Leaders for that matter, whose whole *raison d'être* is derived from their own authority's overall satisfaction score, but does it really matter? We have always pointed out that it is only a number, and it is not as important to residents as it is to officers and officials. The results from the CPA Assessments fall exactly in the same category.

For a local resident do they really care if the authority scores 70% or 60% for that matter, if they are unhappy with the area in which they live? Perhaps the local feeling is that there is too much graffiti or litter around, parking is impossible or even simply that they don't get on with their neighbours. For this group of residents these present the biggest issues in their lives and in some cases they also provide the biggest opportunities where local agencies can make the biggest difference. Many of these issues have got nothing to do with the internal processes or systems adopted by an authority, it's the outcomes or benefits of its actions that make this difference.

Over much of the last five years, The Halo Works Ltd (formerly known as ABA Research Ltd) have been working on an answer to the question of why it is that we have more choice and more money spent on keeping us satisfied and yet we are less satisfied than we have ever been. Many authorities we have

spoken to reported that after an initial improvement in their satisfaction scores, further increases in their figures were getting harder to achieve.

Local authorities and their public service partners are having to work harder and harder in an effort to ensure they maintain their various satisfaction ratings (BVPI's) yet often these efforts bring about frustrating results if the measures people are working towards show a decline in ratings or scores. The answer is that we have in many cases been focussing on the wrong things, that is things which make no real and positive difference to those the organisation is trying to serve. The irony is that by focussing on and using the findings from these misguided ratings and scores the organisation then moves seamlessly towards the bunch of things, which make no difference to the residents.

We know from our work that all organisations go in the direction of their measures and targets. When measures become targets behaviour changes to the extent that people aim to achieve the target over and above what they were supposed to be achieving in their role. The targets are often things, which are easy to measure, and these tend to be transactional things, like how quickly a service is delivered or the frequency of doing something.

These transactional targets then lead to many people in organisations becoming busier and busier with more and more of their time involved in ensuring that they simply meet their targets. Most of these transactional targets are the result of people trying to control what other people do. It isn't often about what's best for local residents. If these measures include ones that take the organisation in a direction away from the core reason they exist a gap appears. For a LSP this could mean a gap appearing between what the resident thought were the benefits of living in an area and what the various organisations serving an area think is their role.

The method we devised and have been using for the last five years is called The Halo Process and it drives insight in the right direction. In essence it's all about ensuring that the consumer insight process helps to change how we think about residents, staff and organisations, rather than supports a counterproductive way of thinking about them. Organisations need to think about why they and their partners are doing the things they are doing. Once this has been defined, the measures need to be redefined. This may mean disposing of many internal measures, put in place to manage and control people. We call these the "head" measures.

All of these measures are measures of processes and transactions. People do not buy or work for a process or a transaction. They don't live in a borough or an area for these either. They need something deeper, a connection to which they want to relate.

We argue that some of these head measures should be replaced, or at least balanced, by measures relating to what the authority and its partners aim to

do for its residents. We call these “halo” measures. They are outcomes based and can be measured too, but differently. We define the “halo” measures as follows:

- It is what your residents see when you and your organisation are at the top of your game
- It is what your staff and other stakeholders are proud to deliver, and allows them to go home feeling that they have made a positive difference
- It shines in every communication with your residents
- It makes them opt-in to your communications, not opt-out
- It appears when you create your future area around your resident’s needs, and your communication supports this

These halo measures are important because although residents may want you to do things quicker or more efficiently, they may, just want to feel happier, safe, reassured or feel they are part of a community that is supported by those working within an area.

The Place Survey looks like an attempt to measure some of these outcomes although you could argue a lot more work will be required with the proposed questionnaire to make it more actionable before the survey goes ‘live’ As a company who has campaigned for the last five years to have research which is “outcome focussed” hearing about the place survey seemed like a good time to think that perhaps the people we had been talking to had listened.

One of the current structures within local government aimed at partnership working is local strategic partnerships. In theory these were designed to bring the different skills and influences together and use their combined resources to tackle the big issues as well as some of the smaller ones in local communities all for the good of local residents.

Our experience tells us that with certain exceptions, this has been more of a dream than a reality. Yes, people want to be seen to be attending the quarterly meetings but actually working together and achieving real measurable results for local communities has only achieved mixed results. So what’s stopping this from happening and will the Place Survey help authorities achieve this objective?

People have told us they would like to get more involved in partnership work, however due to their own internal measures and related targets their resources or energies cannot easily be released into other areas that might not be considered to be key priorities for their specific organisation. One project we conducted with a LSP centred on researching the key benefits or outcomes, which residents wanted from the various bodies within the Partnership. This discussion focused around what people wanted these organisations to achieve together not what they wanted them to do.

Crucial among these were things, which related to the work of the Police. The Police had their own targets, but with careful communication of the research we did among local residents, and the promise of a better chance of hitting their own targets, the Police responded. When we conducted the BVPI survey two years later the council wound up with one of the most improved scores in the southeast. What this proved was that the elusive resident satisfaction number was never going to either stay the same or improve without the agencies working together, and when they did, the view of residents about the local council and the place they lived improved beyond anything which could have been achieved just working on their own.

So where does the Place Survey fit in. Perhaps you could try asking whether the LSP would be prepared to contribute towards conducting the survey, after all the results would be shared with everyone. Better still would be an acceptance from all parties that organisations should be measured by the impact or outcomes of what we all do rather than simply what we do. It's a subtle but important distinction.

We know from our research over the last five years that if you measure the benefits or outcomes of an organisation, as long as these are aligned with the needs of the customer or resident, the area will get better, if you restrict yourself to just measuring what you do, all that will happen is that you just get busier. What would you rather be, better or busier? We know residents want better, and we also know how to achieve this. It's tried and tested, well before the Place Survey idea, and we have the numbers to prove it.

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