

Edinburgh People's Survey – treatment of 'don't know' and neutral responses

Policy and Strategy Committee

6 September 2011

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1 To advise Committee on the inclusion and evaluation of 'don't know' and neutral responses in the Edinburgh People's Survey.
- 1.2 To propose options for the treatment of 'don't know' and neutral responses in the 2011 Edinburgh People's Survey.

2 Summary

- 2.1 Further to the 2010 Edinburgh People's Survey (EPS) results, a review of best practice has been carried out to determine the appropriate treatment of 'don't know' and neutral responses to attitudinal questions. The 2010 EPS showed a decrease in overall satisfaction for a number of indicators which was contrary to previous survey years. There was no evidence of a significant increase in dissatisfaction (dissatisfaction remained very low). Rather, a significantly higher proportion of respondents in 2010 responded 'don't know' or that they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'.
- 2.2 The academic literature on this subject and the Market Research Society advocates the use of 'don't know' and neutral responses in any survey that seeks public opinion. There are several reasons for this - to give respondents the option to answer if they are unsure of their opinion or when there is a possibility that the respondents may not know the answer to a question. Also, as identified by further research to the 2010 Edinburgh People's Survey findings, the 'don't know' and neutral responses can indicate issues of concern or areas that warrant further research¹.
- 2.3 The proposed methodology for treating 'don't knows' in the Edinburgh People's Survey is detailed below. It is advised that the survey continues to give respondents the option of stating 'don't know' or a neutral answer so that important information is not missed. Additional questions to the Edinburgh People's Survey are proposed to gain further insight in to these responses.

¹ Focus Groups on Perception of Local Public Services Research Report by Research Resource, March 2011 http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/file/5005/eps_focus_group_report

This will allow for more accurate analysis and reporting of satisfaction levels with council services.

3 Main report

- 3.1 The methodology for the treatment of ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses outlined below is based on a review of academic studies, Market Research Society guidance, and the practice applied by other local authorities. Managers within the Council were also consulted about the value of ‘don’t know’ data in the Edinburgh People’s Survey for their respective service areas.

Inclusion of ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses

- 3.2 It is common in expressing percentages to specify whether or not they include or exclude those who said ‘don’t know’ or gave a neutral answer. Deciding how to handle such responses will depend on the aims of the question. It may be important to report how many respondents state ‘don’t know’ - for example, if the aim is to determine a respondent’s knowledge of an issue or service, or their likelihood of using a service. In this respect, ‘don’t knows’ and neutral responses can be treated as some kind of answer, as they indicate uncertainty, gaps in communication or other possible issues of concern.
- 3.3 On the other hand, including ‘don’t know’ responses can obscure or distort the findings. As illustrated in Table 1 below, at first glance, it appears that satisfaction with library services is low, but almost 1 in 2 respondents stated ‘don’t know’. If the figures are recalculated to exclude the ‘don’t know’ responses, and only include those who expressed an opinion, then the result is very high satisfaction. Deciding which way to report the data will depend on the context. In most cases it can be useful to report both sets of data: the percentage of respondents who said ‘don’t know’ and the data without the ‘don’t know’ responses (see Table 1).

Table 1 Satisfaction with quality of library facilities - comparison of results with and without the ‘don’t know’ responses (Edinburgh People’s Survey 2010).

	% of respondents (inc. ‘don’t know’ responses)	% of respondents (excl. ‘don’t know’ responses)
Very or fairly satisfied	44	86
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1	14
Very or fairly dissatisfied	7	0
Don’t know	48	
Base:	5025	2617

- 3.4 In the Edinburgh People’s Survey (EPS), the ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses have helped to indicate levels of awareness about a service or service related issue. In a high level resident survey, not all respondents will have experience of services such as libraries, schools, and community facilities, and therefore, are likely to state ‘don’t know’ or no opinion. However, this information can help to determine the need for further research or to address communication gaps. For example, further to the 2010 EPS results,

research was carried out to understand the perceptions and behaviour of potential library customers – the findings will inform a marketing campaign to engage differing groups of potential customers.

- 3.5 ‘Don’t know’ and neutral responses can also indicate issues of concern, which if not included as options in the survey might not otherwise be detected. Further qualitative research, to the 2010 Edinburgh People’s Survey results, found that the high percentage of ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses was influenced by respondent’s uncertainty about the future of public services rather than being based on their experience of them².

Options for treating the ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses

- 3.6 Some local authorities tend to remove the ‘don’t knows’ when calculating satisfaction from high level resident surveys, so as to indicate the response of those who have an opinion. However, some authorities also choose to include the proportion of ‘don’t knows’ as they might indicate an area for further investigation. The Market Research Society advocates that, in most cases, it can be useful to report the data with and without the ‘don’t know’ responses (as shown in Table 1 above).
- 3.7 Exploratory questions may be included in surveys to provide further insight into the ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses. Sample questions of how this could be applied to the Edinburgh People’s Survey are included in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Exploratory questions that can provide further insight into the ‘don’t know’ and neutral responses

Question and information obtained	Value	Where appropriate to the EPS
Question to determine respondents experience of using a service or with how the council responded to a service related issue.	To split satisfaction levels between existing and potential users.	To complement satisfaction questions on libraries, schools, community facilities, and community safety services.
Follow up question to ask reason(s) why respondent stated ‘don’t know’ or ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’.	To report reasons underlying any uncertainty or indifference toward the council and its services.	For indicators where the majority of respondents should be able to give an opinion.

- 3.8 Service managers see the value of asking all survey respondents their opinions about services even if they do not use them. The ‘don’t know’ and neutral response data is increasingly used in the Council to determine awareness of local services, potential use of a service, and to identify any issues and areas for investigation.

² Focus Groups on Perception of Local Public Services Research Report by Research Resource, March 2011 http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/file/5005/eps_focus_group_report

3.9 Based on the above reasons, it is proposed that the survey data be analysed and reported in the following way:

- An initial analysis will be to check the percentage of 'don't know' and neutral responses.
- For indicators where there is a significantly high proportion of 'don't know' responses, two sets of data will be reported – in order to show satisfaction levels with and without the 'don't knows' (as illustrated in Table 1).
- Further to this, the addition of the questions included in Table 2, will provide insight into the reasons why respondents say 'don't know' or 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'. This information will be analysed to report common themes and issues that help to explain the percentage of 'don't knows'. For example, for certain services, there might be a clear link between satisfaction and use of the service.
- Further analysis will also be carried out to report any statistical correlation between the respondent's demographic characteristics and their propensity to give a satisfaction rating or to state 'don't know'.

4 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

5 Equalities Impact

5.1 The requirements of the Equality Act 2010 public sector general equality duty have been considered with relation to the contents of this report, in which there are no apparent impacts as the report relates solely to a different approach to reporting on the outcomes of the Edinburgh People's Survey.

5.2 The survey itself seeks the views individuals of different ages, genders and races, including those who do not have English as a first language and those with mental and physical disabilities. The views of local communities are important as their views influence improvements and changes to service delivery, resulting in a positive impact on quality of life.

6 Environmental Impact

6.1 There is no direct environmental impact arising from this report.

7 Conclusions

7.1 There is a lot of evidence to suggest that 'don't know' and neutral responses provide relevant information to an opinion survey. Research literature and the Market Research Society (MRS) advises that they are included as options in surveys and encourages the use of these responses. It is recognised that, 'don't know' and neutral answers can be treated as some kind of answer, as they indicate a respondent's uncertainty, awareness of an issue, or, areas that may require further investigation.

7.2 The proposed methodology for interpreting 'don't knows' in the 2011 Edinburgh People's Survey draws on best practice as advocated by the Market Research

Society, other local authorities, and academic studies. It is therefore advised that 'don't know' and neutral options continue to be included and reported in the Edinburgh People's Survey – the effect of not including these options and forcing respondents to give an opinion would not only distort the results but carries the risk of losing relevant information.

- 7.3 To gain further insight into 'don't know' and neutral responses, it is advised that open-ended questions are included in the 2011 Edinburgh People's Survey. In order to compare opinions between existing and potential users, questions to determine respondent's recent experience can also be included and reported. This approach should help to contextualise the 'don't knows' and compare levels of satisfaction between different user groups in a more accurate way.

8 Recommendations

- 8.1 To continue to include 'don't know' and neutral responses as options in the EPS questions.
- 8.2 To include additional questions to determine respondent's experience of services and open-ended questions to provide further insight to 'don't know' and neutral responses.
- 8.3 To report the survey results with and without the 'don't know' responses for indicators where there is a significantly high proportion of these data; and, to report the reasons underlying the 'don't knows', as evidenced in the survey.
- 8.4 To advise managers and partners on how to interpret and use these data in order to develop customer insight and inform the development of Council services.

Mark Turley
Director of Services for Communities

Appendices

Contact/tel/
Email Davina Fereday
0131 529 7040
davina.fereday@edinburgh.gov.uk

Wards
affected All wards.

Single
Outcome
Agreement The EPS Survey supports all national outcomes and in particular:
'Our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people's needs'.

Background
Papers Policy and Strategy Committee Report *Edinburgh People's Survey – Autumn 2010 and Further Research into Residents' Perceptions of the Council and Local Services*, 17 May 2011

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