

Sounding Board Survey Summary

'The impacts of austerity measures on local services (2015)'

The Rural Services Network have repeated a survey first carried out last year using their Sounding Board, established of Councillors from their Local Authority membership and also Parish Councillors from the Rural Services Community.

The survey was repeated to see if there were any noticeable differences one year on. 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	0%	0.5%
Slightly Better	12.8%	0.5%
Unchanged	25.6%	25.9%
Slightly Worse	46.2%	48.7%
Much Worse	15.4%	24.4%

There is a small difference between the Local Authority and Parish Councillor responses to this question. Overall, 73% of responses from Parish Councils felt that current public services had got worse compared to 3 years ago, in contrast to only 62% of Local Authority Councillors.

The most significant change from the previous survey has come from Local Authority Councillors, where last year 39% felt that services had got better over the previous 3 years, and this year the figure had dropped to only 13% 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:

- 35% of Local Authority Councillors felt that recycling collection had got much better in the last 3 years compared to 27% of Parish Councillors. This was an improvement on last year where only 7% of Parish Councillors felt that recycling collection had got better.
- 59% of Parish Councillors felt that the police services had got worse over the last 3 years, an increase of 10% from the survey the year before, compared with 60% of Local Authority Councillors, a large increase from 30% the previous year.
- Everyone was generally in agreement about Road Maintenance with 64% of Local Authority Councillors and 76% 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 significantly increases between all respondents and then users of the service for both Parish and Local Authority Councillors. For example overall 26% of Parish Councillors felt that it had got worse but 62% of Parish Councillors that were users of the service felt that it had got worse. 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 21% overall to 68% 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 37% and amongst users of the service was 50%.
- Sport and Leisure Facilities – only 5% of the Parish Councillors that used the service felt that Sports and Leisure Facilities had got better over the last compared to 13% of Local Authority Councillors, this is a huge reduction on the 57% of Local Authority Councillors who felt that the service had got better when asked the same question a year ago.

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 still key issues to contend with. The removal of subsidised school transport or reduction in the service has led to key issues accessing education post 16 for those in rural communities.

Healthcare has become a particular issue for Parish Councillors with numerous respondents raising the issue of waiting times for GP appointments. There were a large number of public realm responses from Parish Councillors for example reduction in grass cutting, street sweeping reduced and public toilets shut, perhaps indicating the changes to front line service provision priorities. Local Authority Councillors raised a number of positive impacts around transferring services to community run, better participation in local planning and coordinated working between multi-agencies.

When considering future changes that are due to be implemented, these included examples such as 'library consolidation', 'less rural buses', 'threatened closure of branch GP surgery', 'tightening of qualifying criteria for social care applicants', all of which have worrying consequences for rural communities. For example the closure of a library in a rural location where there may be no public transport to reach an alternative, may reduce the opportunities for rural residents to access the internet and other support services.

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. The impact is being felt to a greater degree when compared to a year ago with long lists of services being reduced and closure of local facilities. Services are being centralised to support efficiencies but in rural locations this reduction in locations can mean that services are harder to access, particularly for those at risk of social exclusion and isolation. All local authorities are making efficiencies and changing the way that they deliver services, however rural authorities need to be more innovative to still provide basic access to key services for their communities.