



**NCVO response to the
Department for
Communities and Local
Government consultation
on the future of the
Citizenship Survey**

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NCVO is the largest general membership body for voluntary and community organisations in England. Established in 1919, NCVO represents over 8,400 organisations, from large 'household name' charities to small groups involved in all areas of voluntary and community action at a local level. NCVO champions voluntary action. Our vision is of a society in which people are inspired to make a positive difference within their communities. A vibrant voluntary and community sector deserves a strong voice and the best support. NCVO works to provide that voice and support.

NCVO is gravely concerned about the Department for Communities and Local Government's intention to cancel the Citizenship Survey. The survey has proven to be an invaluable and unique source of information for research, policy and practice on citizen engagement. No other source provides such regular and reliable data on such a wide range of topics, from informal volunteering to feelings of influence, which capture the multiple facets of citizen engagement. One of the main advantages of the Survey is that it provides a time series allowing for medium and long-term trends to be identified, highlighting where changes have taken place and where improvements still need to happen. Without the Citizenship Survey this would no longer be possible.

In the current context of the Big Society, we believe that Citizenship Survey is more than ever an essential tool for policy and practice, and can help Government assess impact. All institutions and organisations interested in broadening people's opportunities to engage in their communities, whether in Government or in the voluntary and community sector, need to be able to access a robust data set to inform their work. The Survey also represents a useful tool to help measure well-being which, we know, is something that the Government is keen to do.

To cut the costs of producing the Citizenship Survey a number of solutions could be envisaged including reduced frequency and scope. It may also be worth considering how the research community could take on some of the analysis and reporting; what it cannot do though is collect data on this scale.

If you would like further information or to discuss any of the points made in this response please contact Véronique Jochum on 020 7520 2482 or email <mailto:veronique.jochum@ncvo-vol.org.uk>

Question 1: What are your current uses of the Citizenship Survey?

How do you use the Citizenship Survey data? Please provide information on:

a. the topic areas you find most useful

The topic areas we have found the most useful are the ones relating to empowered and active communities. We have found the data on volunteering, charitable giving and civic participation critical to a number of projects and initiatives at NCVO that explore the state of civil society and participation. The demographic breakdown of this data has been particularly important in understanding who participates and who doesn't, and in identifying where the gaps are. The outputs on community cohesion have equally been useful for our work on social capital and localism, looking at the role of local communities and people's connections to their local community. These topics areas are also of interest to our members, particularly but not exclusively to infrastructure bodies and volunteer-involving organisations.

b. the analysis you need to undertake

The main data analysis we have undertaken has focused on identifying trends in terms of the percentage of people involved over time in formal and informal volunteering, civic participation, consultation and activism and calculating an estimate of the numbers of people concerned. It is for us very important to continue to be able to see how these numbers change over time, and how different sections of society (e.g. by age, gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class) take part in different activities, to different degrees, over time. In the UK Civil Society Almanac, we also use the Citizenship Survey data to calculate the economic value of volunteering. This figure has been quoted in a wide variety of sources including government reports and the press.

Emerging agendas – in particular policies around the Big Society that stress citizen engagement, behaviour change and well-being – will inevitably require government and voluntary organisations to understand whether and how they are having an impact. The Citizenship Survey provides an invaluable evidence base to do this.

c. the purpose for which you currently use Citizenship Survey data

The Citizenship Survey has been use to inform and shape our policy and campaigns work on behalf of the voluntary and community sector, to highlight the impact of voluntary action and how it can be further encouraged. These questions are also of importance to government, particularly in the current context of the Big Society agenda.

We have used the Citizenship Survey data for a range of projects and publications at NCVO. It complements the data that we ourselves collect and

helps provide, government and others, a more comprehensive view of voluntary action in all its forms. Over the last year, these outputs have included the UK Civil Society Almanac 2010, the Pathways through Participation project, the Big Society Evidence Base and the forthcoming Participation Almanac. These various outputs are used by government, local authorities, the national and local media and the voluntary and community sector to inform policy- and decision-making.

d. the current frequency of the Survey and your need for time series

Having a consistent time series is crucial for our research and has allowed us to identify trends and make comparisons. Without a reliable and regular time series we would only be able to have a snapshot at a certain point in time, which would be far less powerful and instructive. A key element of the time series is ensuring that the questions and categories are comparable over time. With a time series we are able to explore the findings to see where progress has been made and importantly identify the areas where improvements still need to take place. This is also crucial for government policy.

We believe reducing the frequency of fieldwork may be one of the best options for CLG to find efficiencies. A yearly survey is our preference, however if this is not considered possible because of the current drive to reduce public spending, a biennial survey would be our second preferred option rather than stopping the survey altogether.

e. what geographic level analysis you require

For most of our outputs national figures have been sufficient, although for some of our outputs including those for the Pathways through Participation project we have used data from the Place Survey (which has been cancelled) at the local authority level. We also know that many of our members need a regional or a local breakdown. For them being able to compare a national average with a regional/local figure is very valuable.

f. which sample boosts you utilise and require (if any)

Research evidence from a range of sources shows that some people are still excluded from participation, including people from BME communities and people with disabilities. So a sample boost for both would be welcomed.

The ethnic minority boost used in the current survey has considerably improved our understanding of the importance of informal volunteering for various ethnic groups.

g. which outputs you find most useful, and why

- Yearly reports for their succinctness and focus on key headline figures.

- The Empowered Communities topic reports for the information they provide on people's feeling of empowerment, engagement in formal political and governance processes, people's perceptions of institutions and trust.
- The Volunteering and Charitable Giving topic reports for the information they provide on two activities that are a core component of the voluntary and community sector. The level of detail here allows us to improve our understanding of the 'actors of participation', what motivates people from participating and what prevents them from doing so, and where they participate. This is key to our work.
- The Community Cohesion topic reports for the information they provide on perceptions of community and local area, social networks and attitudes, bridging/meaningful interaction.

h. what level of precision you require for these estimates

If the survey was based on a smaller sample size, it would be difficult to carry out some of the analysis that we have done in the past. If we want the data to stay meaningful and reliable when broken down by geographical area or, for instance by age or gender, then the sample size should remain the same.

Question 2: What are the implications of stopping the Citizenship Survey?

a. What would be the impact to you if Citizenship Survey data are no longer available?

Engaged citizens are at the heart of civil society. Many voluntary and community organisations would simply not exist without their support so it is essential for NCVO to have access to the best evidence base available on the subject.

The Citizenship Survey has provided us with an invaluable quantitative dataset that is reliable and robust. It has informed and influenced our research and policy work on citizen engagement, social capital and local communities. We know of no other data source that could replace it.

The UK Civil Society Almanac, produced by NCVO, is considered the major reference source for information on the civil society and the voluntary and community sector. It is widely referenced and quoted by policy-makers (including in government), practitioners and academics. Without the Citizenship Survey, the chapter of the Almanac on volunteering would simply not exist. This would significantly reduce the comprehensive nature of the publication and undermine people's understanding of the sector.

Question 3: What are the alternatives to the Citizenship Survey?

a. What other sources of data on topics that the Survey covers do you, or could you, use instead?

We constantly use a range of sources to inform our thinking, but these tend to be more qualitative in nature or based on surveys that are much smaller. There are no other sources that we know of that could replace the Citizenship Survey in terms of the breath and depth of information provided. A key consideration is also that 'alternative' sources of data on volunteering would not continue the time series established by the Citizenship Survey: as such, they are not substitutes and at best poor alternatives.

We have used the Helping Out Survey extensively, but this is based on the Citizenship Survey sample. It is now somewhat outdated as it was published in 2007.

We have frequently used the Place Survey in the past, however this has now been abolished.

b. Would data of a less stringent quality (e.g. collected through quota sampling) be of good enough quality for your purposes?

No, because if the methodology changed it is likely that the findings would not be comparable to previous years. One of the major advantages of the Citizenship Survey is that it offers a reliable and consistent time series with comparable data from one year to the other.

c. In the absence of the Citizenship Survey, how could the Department help with access to other sources of similar data?

It is unclear what these alternative sources of similar data are.

The Department could provide easy access to all existing surveys covering some of the information contained in the Citizenship Survey through their website, but this evidence base would be far less rich than the data provided by the Citizenship Survey.

Question 4: What are your views on questionnaire content?

a. Which questions currently included in the 2010-11 Citizenship Survey are essential for your needs? See:

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/citizenshipsurvey201011questions

All the sections of the 2010-11 Citizenship Survey are important and have the potential to inform and shape policies relating to the Big Society.

The sections on community, volunteering, influencing and empowerment are particularly important to our work. Some questions could be asked less frequently than others.

Question 5: Do you have any other comments?

a. Do you have any further comments on plans for the future of the Citizenship Survey?

The Citizenship Survey is particularly relevant and important in the current policy context. It could significantly help inform the Big Society agenda by providing data on a range of topics that underpin some of the key ideas linked to the agenda, including social action, giving and local communities. It could also help monitor how the agenda is developing and being implemented, and measure how Big Society policies are having an impact.

If the Citizenship Survey was to be abolished we would lose very valuable information on a number of indicators of well-being (people's relationships, sense of community, sense of empowerment etc.) which David Cameron has stated he is keen to measure. Plus, the Citizenship Survey is so relevant to current policy agendas and priorities, that its abolition could be perceived as a deliberate attempt to avoid measuring how the Big Society develops in the future.

To cut the costs of producing the Citizenship Survey a number of solutions could be envisaged. The Survey could, for instance, be produced less frequently and include fewer questions. It may also be worth considering how the research community could contribute to the analysis and reporting; what it cannot do though is collect data on this scale.

**NCVO Research Team
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