

Communities, Perceptions and Civic Participation - a survey of public attitudes and activity



At a Glance

The study, the first using the Yorkshire and Humber Citizens Panel, investigated community participation and civic engagement.

The region has opportunities to heighten both, and better understanding of citizen activity and viewpoints will help inform how to respond.

The survey uncovered broad and varied community activity. Most people liked their neighbourhoods and many were involved in voluntary or neighbourly activities. However,

time pressures and competing activities mean that increasing voluntary activity will be a challenge that demands accessible, attractive and well promoted responses.

On civic engagement, generally positive views about access to local councils, councillors and MPs contrasted with scepticism about national politics.

Whilst the majority of respondents did vote at elections, those who abstained were unconvinced of the positive impact voting could make. A sizeable majority though were keen to influence local services. This, along with civic participation at the community and voluntary levels, is a platform that can be built on in increasing democratic engagement.

Background, Rationale and Approach

A range of regional and local partners identified community participation and voluntary activity as a priority for investigation.

Yorkshire and Humber fares less well on indicators of these issues than do many other English regions. Yet greater community activity and influence upon local decision making can build stronger communities, improve neighbourhoods, and engender responsive local services.

This research was based on an online survey sent to a newly established Regional Citizens Panel. This was a cost effective way of reaching large numbers of people from across Yorkshire and Humber. Yorkshire Futures commissioned Acxiom Limited to create a regional Citizens Panel and to conduct this first

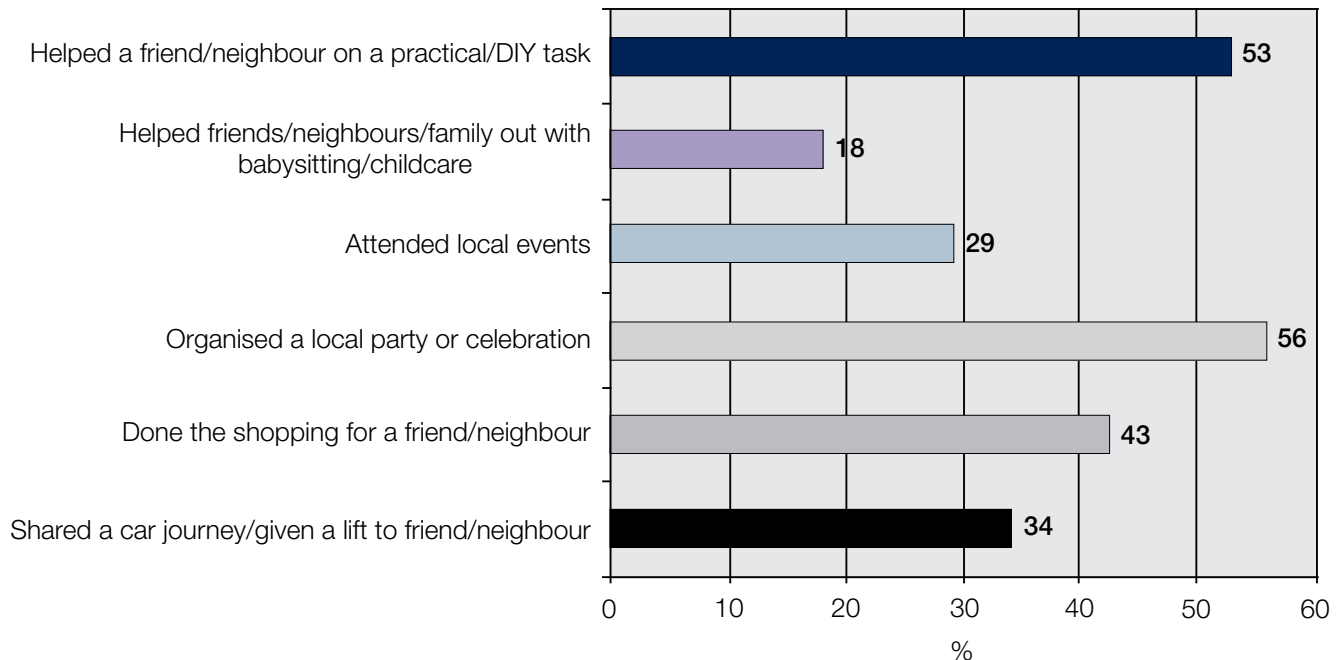
survey using it. Well over three thousand individuals responded and agreed to reply to future surveys. The results are not intended to be a strictly representative sample suitable for ongoing monitoring purposes. Instead they provide an illustrative snapshot of opinions and activity.

Neighbourhood Perceptions and Community Engagement

People were generally positive about where they lived. Sizeable majorities said that they liked the neighbourhoods they lived in, that they had a sense of ‘belonging’ and that people there were warm and friendly. However, there was some differentiation between high and low earners, particularly on perceptions of safety. Those on higher incomes felt notably safer in their neighbourhoods than those on lower incomes. The centrality of community safety and of home to many people emerged repeatedly in the findings and is relevant when attempting to reinvigorate civic activity.

Around a quarter of respondents said they were involved in neighbourhood improvements. Additionally, between 5-15% were involved in each of a range of organised voluntary activities, with ‘formal volunteering’, neighbourhood watch, faith related activities, and theatre/music/arts the most popular. The spread of interests was more striking than the numbers involved in any one activity. In contrast, more people were involved in less formalised ‘neighbourly activity’ such as events or helping out neighbours (see Figure 1). This demonstrates that many people remain connected with their communities despite the suggestion that society is becoming more individualised.

Figure 1 – Which of the following activities have you done locally in the last 6 months?



By far the main reason given for not doing more voluntary activity was lack of time. However, when asked to prioritise how they would use an extra hour or two, only 13% of respondents selected participating in local activities within their top three choices. More popular choices were relaxing at home, jobs around the house and socialising with friends and family. Hence volunteering is in competition with other,

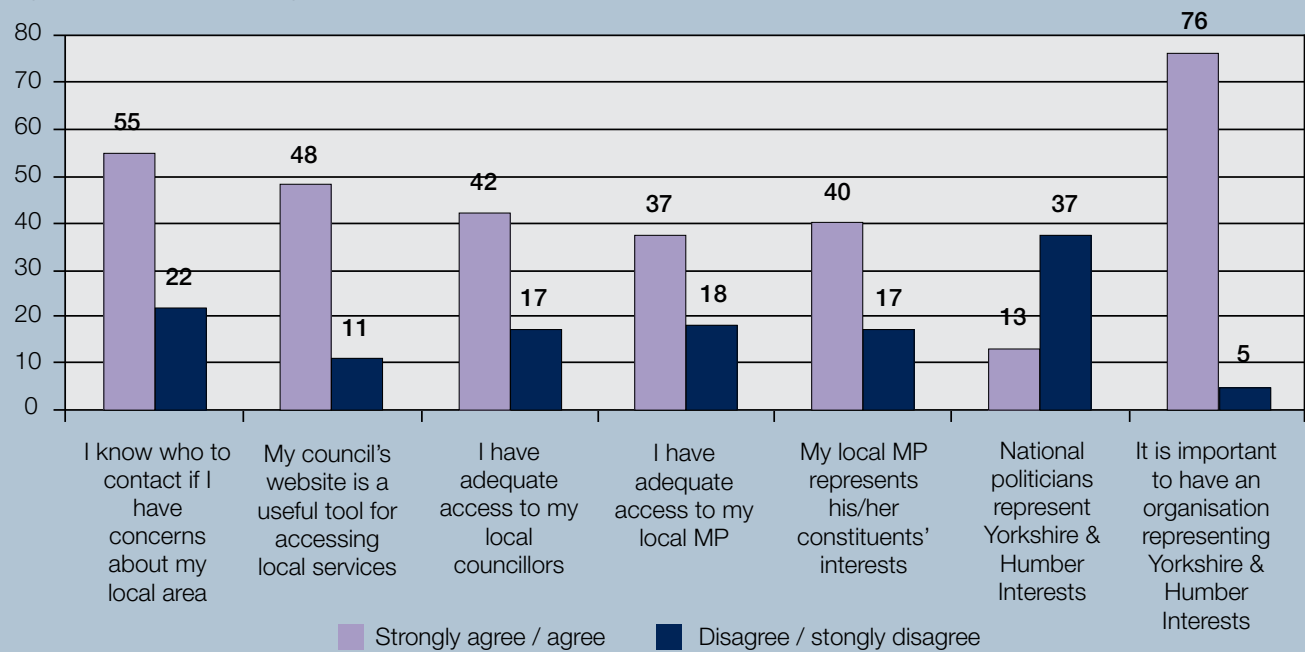
more self-interested, activities. There will be merit in considering how to promote voluntary activity in that context, building on what is quite extensive (if under explored) neighbourly activity. Looking at how community activity links with and can support political and democratic engagement is a further opportunity.

Democratic Engagement

Voting levels amongst the sample were relatively high - not unexpected in a sample who are by instinct 'responders' - with a majority saying they always vote in general (77%) and local (66%) elections. Reasons for not voting were also probed. The chief ones that emerged were quite fundamental in nature, for instance lack of interest in politics; that there was nobody standing whom they would like to vote for; that parties were too similar; and that voting made no difference. The practicalities of voting itself were a minor issue in comparison.

Levels of awareness were higher for national rather than local politicians (e.g. of local MPs compared to local councillors). However, cynicism about politics was much more evident at national level too, with only a minority of people trusting what politicians say, or believing that national politicians represent Yorkshire and Humber. In contrast, there was strong support for there being 'an organisation representing Yorkshire and Humber interests'.

Figure 2 – Perceptions of governance and access to democratic representatives



Attitudes towards the role and accessibility of local MPs, councillors and councils were positive more often than not. There was fairly strong awareness of how to contact local

councils, including through their websites. Desire to influence local services was also high, with a sizeable majority keen to be able to influence services, especially health, policing and waste.



Key Messages & Conclusions

The region has major opportunities to heighten civic engagement and participation. Key conclusions from this research that will assist in shaping a response are:

- 1) **Most people like their neighbourhoods.** Far more agreed that they enjoyed living in their neighbourhood than disagreed, and there were positive views about other factors like sense of community and belonging. One area that can be improved upon is consultation on major developments.
- 2) **Perceptions vary by income** and length of residence. Those in more transitory and poorer areas had less rosy (if often still positive) views, especially about feeling safe or not. The importance of improving community safety in deprived areas is reinforced.
- 3) There is a **wide spread of voluntary activity.** About a quarter of respondents were involved in neighbourhood improvement, and typically 5-15% were involved in each of a wide range of voluntary activities.
- 4) Time is a key issue. Lack of time is the main reason given for not getting more involved in voluntary activity, but **lack of time and competing priorities for free time will make heightening voluntary activity a tough challenge.** Promoting it through connection to home and personal interests may be one response.
- 5) **Levels of informal neighbourhood activity are healthy,** (e.g. helping neighbours with tasks) and exceed formal voluntary activity. This activity will contribute to social capital and warrants greater attention.
- 6) Voting levels were quite high, but **barriers to voting were identified.** Concerns about whether voting would make a difference, differentiation between parties, boldness of plans and their local relevance were the main reasons for not voting. These far outweighed any issues about the practicalities of voting.
- 7) Satisfaction with access to individual constituency MPs and with the job they are doing was much more apparent than trust in what politicians say or how well they serve regional interests. **A large majority supported the role of a regional body representing Yorkshire and Humber interests.**
- 8) Most people had **positive views about access to local councils,** including through websites. Nevertheless, there is scope to improve access for significant numbers. Desire to influence services was also high. Good public participation that genuinely makes a difference has potential to help diffuse the cynicism and apathy too many feel about democratic institutions.

Further Information and Project Details

The survey and raw data analysis was completed by Axiom Ltd in 2007/ 2008. The full report of findings was produced by and is available from Yorkshire Futures.

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