

Current practice among Local Authorities and other public agencies

The COHDMAP phase 1 report contains the following examples of “good practice”, drawn from visits, audits, internal reports and a postal survey of local authorities, supplemented by interviews with a selection of officers in places believed to have developed strategies to support their needs to monitor population diversity and community cohesion.

General comments

“Overall, it is clear that there is great diversity in the level of activity and types of approach (and trust in data provision) between local authorities. Clearly, the different responsibilities of District, County and ‘Unitary’ authorities create some difficulties in presenting a single picture, and there do seem to be differences in the degree to which there are local data sharing arrangements between district and higher-level authorities, as there are in the existence (or otherwise) of local strategic and development partnership groupings. It may not be totally surprising that some local authorities see themselves as having ‘no immediate need’ to collect data on migrants and minority groups, but we might suggest that this is a mistake. Indeed, all public bodies now have a statutory duty to maintain a ‘Race Equality Strategy’ which would require such data.

In practice, nearly all authorities stated that the lack of coherent and accessible data on diverse populations was a constraint on their planning and service delivery. A number of points were made, including the need for consistency in government policy and the value of central guidance or support. One local authority wanted a BS8766 database on all residents and businesses. London boroughs relied heavily on the services of the GLA, which was not a facility available to other districts. Data were definitely needed to ‘shape services and collect outcomes’ and drove the provision of resources – and their availability from central government, so that absence of reliable local data made it hard to challenge what were felt to be wrong allocations. One urban district had seriously considered ‘doing a mini-census targeted at areas where significant population change affecting cohesion is known to have taken place’ – and had in fact conducted a district-wide census-like survey several years ago. Others were hoping that a national set of data ‘at local level’ (i.e. at least down to ward) could be made available at an interval of less than ten years.

It is clear that very few local authorities are collecting data specifically to inform their policy and practice in regard to community cohesion. The majority ‘use data collected for other purposes’ although a small number advised us that they were developing strategies for some specific data collection. (Most were using one or more of the Home Office Community Cohesion questions, usually as part of their regular ‘best value’ surveys, but some had trimmed these in response to budget strictures and there was no consistent use of all questions – see below). Very few had adequate population estimates, although some were now working as part of local (or regional) consortia to develop a common set for projections, although few of these included breakdowns by ethnicity or culture. Some consortia were based around health bodies, and these were more interested in diversity issues, while others were based on Crime Reduction Partnerships or local economic development groupings. The regional Government Office (in the North East) had supported the development of a Regional Cohesion Forum, which had also linked into academic research for support. Nearly all were in agreement that more and better data were needed and that the present situation could cause them problems: one specifically pinpointed the inability of ONS and similar datasets to identify the existence or development of ‘new migrant’ groupings (another noting the lack of data on BME age, health and attitudes to services), and there was evidence of a move to hire services from consultancies to fill the gap. One group of local authorities had formed links with a Race Equality Partnership and launched a programme of work with a conference, to ensure that all communities were involved. There did not seem to be any regular pattern of partners, some working with NASS and others making their own small area forecasts apparently based on personal local knowledge.

Population

The majority of Local Authorities relied heavily on the ONS “Neighbourhood Statistics” and the annual updating of ‘mid-year estimates’, supported by their own insights from service monitoring. These data were generally only of value for overall numbers, and rarely believed to provide much detail. Some places were more sophisticated than others and capable of complex mathematical modelling to adapt the “RG” (ONS) data to local needs, while others compared data with their biennial or three-yearly ‘satisfaction’ surveys of residents. In London, reliance was placed on the GLA, while in outer areas some County Councils had ‘demographic units’ but these were also subject to cutbacks. FHSA (Health Service) data were also used to estimate overall population turnover but these were mistrusted as often being ‘inflated’.

Health

Some PCTs (NHS Primary Care Trusts) appeared to be willing to collaborate with local authorities to provide access to, or analyses of, GP registrations and the use of ‘walk-in’ centres: one specifically indicated that ethnicity was an issue, while others were only obtaining crude overall data on turnover. A few local authorities referred to collaboration with or provision by the Strategic Health Authority’s dataset, and the role of the Public Health Observatories and Cancer Registry, at a broader level of analysis. One LA had appointed a joint PCT/LA Health Improvement Manager who used all data across agencies and another was engaged in a joint project with their local PCT and the SHA to analyse data on GP registration and the use of the ‘walk-in’ centre, noting that ‘ethnicity is an issue here’. At least one LA appeared to have obtained small-area estimates using data extracted from GP registrations but we believe that this was restricted to age/sex and postcode area information. The current state of Ethnic Record Keeping in primary care is highly under-developed, while few acute trusts (hospitals) have reached expected levels of coverage on inpatient users.

Crime & Disorder

Most Local Authorities are members of a local Crime Reduction Partnership (or Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership) and share data with local police forces on levels of recorded crime, or extract relevant data from local Crime Surveys and Community Safety surveys. Some conduct three-yearly Crime Audits, which may include attention to ethnicity data. One reported a locally commissioned Quality of Life survey for their CDRP, and that ‘Neighbourhood Profiles’ were being prepared by the police and local area committees. It was evidently possible to obtain and use software that could provide daily/weekly/monthly updates on crimes mapped by postcode but analysis varied from this to quarterly or annual: not all could examine patterns by ethnicity (of victim or perpetrator).

Education

Virtually all Local Authorities referred to the central role of the PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) and regular analysis of the central pupil database maintained as part of schools’ management information systems. A few continue to conduct their own language census exercises but ‘this will be redundant when this information becomes mandatory as part of the DfES collections next year’. Data was not always shared to District levels by County bodies responsible for education. Clearly, the regular and almost universal operation of the schools database provides the best and most consistent source of information on population change (in selected age and demographic groups) and the changes proposed by DfES may assist this.

Employment

Data on issues relating to employment were surprisingly sparse and inconsistent. There was the potential to examine data on VAT registration, Home Office data on ‘overseas workers’, an annual police survey of local farmers to identify groups of seasonal migrant workers, and some LAs referred to data from their local Job Centre and the annual Labour Force Survey (again at a larger regional level) – only one obtained monthly updates of JCP data on a GIS database, and another relied on ONS monthly statistics which did not give detail on the

characteristics of employees, as well as some occasional local surveys (or a larger biannual survey of employers). Interviews suggested that a high level of reliance was placed on informal sources of information and small reliance placed on official statistics as being largely flawed.

Housing

Several Local Authorities had regular meetings with a Private Landlords' Forum, and many also organised housing needs surveys at varying intervals. Some had access to choice-based lettings data or information such as street counts of homeless people and rough sleepers. Only one mentioned analysis of housing benefits claims data, and another referred to information gained from the Home Office IND website regarding households supported by NASS. Many no longer have responsibility for housing, and not all districts which have, pass that data to their higher-level county bodies. There seemed to be less concern generally about housing-based information, although RSLs can access very detailed analysis of lettings data on the Housing Corporation joint centre CORE (Continuous Recording) database which actually comprises three sets: on 'current stock' profiles of general family and sheltered homes, supported housing, and sales/shared ownership and right-to-buy housing, including (ONS16) ethnicity and postcode data. There are however no data on where people go to if they leave. It may be possible to estimate offers of housing made to 'refugees' and those rehomed because of racial harassment, but these categories may not be identical with Home Office definitions and 'Other White', disability and language categories are not defined.

Ethnicity, Culture & Faith

Few LAs had any independent sources of information regarding the ethnic or cultural breakdown and change of their populations. Some were able to estimate change based on their service delivery monitoring, compared with the ONS neighbourhood statistics data, but this might assume that there was no improvement (or deterioration) in uptake rates across ethnic groups. One mentioned having its own annual 'BME Survey' which was conducted in 'close collaboration with the ethnic community council', and another was linked to a local Faith Forum. Some information on faith profiles was suggested from the SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) and others stated that they had 'good links' to local faith leaders, although others regarded this as problematic due to the propensity to offer 'inflated figures'. It was possible to get some estimate of ethnic profile from regular sample surveys according to a few LAs, but for the majority there was no consistent attention to the issue.

Travelling Populations (Gypsy/Roma)

Data on these populations was seen as problematic, and not always a locally significant issue. Most contributed to the regular ODPM 'caravan counts' and a few held specific 'travellers needs surveys', or relied on the work of a designated officer in charge of 'permanent sites'. Further (less statistical) evidence was drawn from a variety of sources including environmental health, police, schools and social services reports, or occasional research projects.

Asylum Seekers/Refugees

In areas designated as reception areas by NASS, there was often an Asylum Support team who were generally well informed and kept up-to-date records. Other areas used the experience or insight of Race Equality Councils, local research or the IND website, but there was no consistent attention paid to these issues or monitoring of 'unofficial' settlement.

Attitudes of Local Residents

Nearly all local authorities felt that they were in touch with, and monitoring, resident opinion, usually through annual surveys (in about half of cases), or three-yearly ones (usually for the national Best Value exercise) and some had smaller but more frequent 'citizens panel' surveys, although we were unable to establish how representative these were. Comments made included the observation that 'If we don't know who the population is it is hard to target

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consultation and surveys', and that as they were dependent on 'how the community feels, so ongoing grassroots feedback is needed'. There was in one area especially concern about the uptake of homes in new major housing developments, and so (retrospective) case study research was planned.

Analysis of the pattern of use of the 'Home Office' CC questions showed that while nearly all LAs used at least one of these questions, particularly CC4 ('you can influence decisions') and CC3 ('which issues are most important') CC1 and CC5 were less often used, and CC10 ('where you meet other ethnic groups') by less than a quarter. These seem to be relatively 'soft' indicators of community tension and we were unable to identify any consistent use that might indicate to what extent they could be used to predict emergent tensions. The national report of the Citizenship survey does not seem to show that diversity or population turnover was associated with any such analysis or conclusions, and it might be worth revisiting these data to seek to prove or disprove this hypothesis.