

Deriving Quality of Life Indicators in Urban Areas A Practitioner's Guide

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In order to promote *practical* applications of the concept of sustainability by Galway City Council, the study developed indicators to capture quality of life considerations as perceived by the citizens of Galway. The study, which forms part of a larger project funded by the EPA (<http://erc.epa.ie/safer/reports>), focused on integrating sustainability practices into all aspects of the local authority's activities and plans. The development of transferable models of good practice in this domain and their dissemination throughout the local government system in Ireland represent some of the primary goals of the project.

Background

Quality of life considerations have recently emerged in the international literature relating to sustainability indicators. It is argued that sustainability initiatives that detract from the quality of life of citizens lack credibility. Consequently, quality of life is increasingly regarded as an integral part of sustainability programmes. There is little consensus, however, in relation to what exactly 'quality of life' means and how it is most appropriately measured. Much of the literature on the broader subject of sustainability indicators is of relevance to the formulation and practical application of quality of life indicators. This literature stresses the merits of sustainability indicators as informational tools that can be used to engage citizens in working toward shared sustainability goals.

The derivation of quality of life indicators that give expression to the voice of the community at large is central to this project. Focus groups were used extensively to obtain the opinions of various strands of the community in Galway, regarding the issues they considered to be germane to quality of life in the city.

Key Points

Nine major themes emerged as particularly significant: (i) transport; (ii) size of the city; (iii) community; (iv) identity; (v) facilities; (vi) planning and development; (vii) environment; (viii) economic and (ix) social considerations.

The focus group discussions together with relevant international literature informed the design of a questionnaire survey through which new baseline information regarding quality of life in Galway City was assembled. The questionnaire survey was conducted with 200 participants from five electoral divisions (EDs) across Galway: (i) Salthill; (ii) Renmore; (iii) Claddagh; (iv) Menlough and (v) Ballybaan. These areas were selected on the basis that they spanned a diverse range of socio-economic classes. Salient results from the questionnaire survey are summarised below (full report detailing results and related maps are available at: <http://erc.epa.ie/safer/reports>).

Science, Technology, Research & Innovation for the Environment

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Transport

- Across the city 62.6% agreed with the statement 'I'm satisfied with the public transport'. However, some 25.5% of respondents felt that traffic was a major problem while a further 33% regarded it as a problem, though not a serious one.

Community and Identity

- 92% of respondents were 'fairly satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their neighbourhood as a place to live and 67% of respondents had a sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods; 83% of respondents trust their neighbours.
- The vast majority of respondents felt that their neighbourhoods were 'very' safe or 'fairly' safe (69.5%) with only 12% of respondents feeling that their neighbourhoods were 'fairly' or 'very' unsafe. Overall, 79.3% 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree' with the statement 'I feel safe in the city'.

Facilities

- With regard to facilities in the city of Galway, 42.6% of respondents were satisfied with the active leisure facilities (e.g. swimming pool, gym etc.) in their area, while 39.8% were satisfied with the passive leisure facilities (areas for walking, jogging etc.) in their area. However, only 25.8% of respondents were satisfied with access to facilities in their local area.
- Overall, 52.3% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I am satisfied with the health services in Galway'.

Planning and Development

- Overall, the majority of respondents felt that insensitive building developments and derelict sites were not a problem in their areas. In Salthill insensitive building development represents a considerable problem for almost one-quarter of respondents in this ED. Approximately one-half of respondents from the Claddagh ED considered insensitive building development as a problem in the area.

Environment

- 59.6% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'The city was a clean city'. Air pollution in the city was not perceived as a problem by 81.9% of respondents. In contrast, litter was viewed as a problem by 42% of respondents.
- There was widespread satisfaction with the recycling services provided (85% of respondents were 'fairly' satisfied or 'very' satisfied).

Economic Considerations

- Regarding economic indicators, most respondents to whom the question were applicable reported that employment was easy to find in Galway City.
- Purchasing good housing in Galway City regarded as problematic by 66% of respondents. Many found it particularly challenging to acquire suitable housing at an affordable price.

Social Considerations

- 28% of respondents felt that there was a good deal of tension between different ethnic groups in the city, although 57% of respondents felt that 'non-nationals who live in Galway are well integrated'.

Personal Quality of Life Factors

- Levels of job satisfaction and satisfaction with educational attainment were generally high, except in Ballybaan and Menlough where many people are not particularly satisfied on this count.
- Except for Ballybaan, there was a high degree of satisfaction with standards of current accommodation across the city. This is regarded as particularly interesting in the light of the frequently expressed view that satisfactory accommodation is increasingly inaccessible to many in the city.
- Levels of satisfaction with social life were very high – especially in Salthill and Renmore where many people were actively engaged in social and recreational pursuits.
- People in Galway were generally very satisfied with their state of health with the notable exception of Renmore where only one-half of respondents were 'highly satisfied' with their health, compared to 75% across the city as a whole. This anomalous situation probably relates to the relatively older age profile of Renmore residents.
- 74% expressed themselves as 'highly' satisfied with their standard of living with, however, some striking spatial contrasts – for instance, 97% of Salthill residents were 'highly' satisfied

with their living standards but only 53% of Ballybaan residents placed themselves in this category.

In addition to establishing new baseline data, the survey examined perceptions of personal quality of life. The results suggest that, by and large, high levels of satisfaction existed with regard to many elements of quality of life in Galway City. Nonetheless, the results also identified a number of areas of dissatisfaction and indeed they highlighted that certain issues varied in significance from one ED to another and some were specific to certain locations only.

Policy Implications

This report has identified a set of quality of life indicators for the city of Galway, which is being monitored at the city level and for each of the EDs.

The development of a universal set of indicators for sustainability is ideal for national planning and international comparisons. However, as we have seen in the case of Galway City, huge differences in geographical, economic and socio-cultural contexts exists that constrain the development of a universal set of sustainability indicators. Furthermore, there are a number of difficulties involved in developing quality of life indicators as they are generally qualitative in nature. This research has focused on developing a methodology for formulating and testing quality of life indicators which can be tailored to local contexts and can incorporate qualitative aspects of quality of life and hence is transferable to other municipal authorities, national and international. (Further details about the policy implications of this work are available on: <http://erc.epa.ie/safer/reports>).

Concluding Remarks

Central to this project is the engagement of Galway City Council in dialogue with citizens and communities in order to gather relevant information and shape sustainable development practices. The sustainable development discourse places heavy emphasis on the need to develop more democratic mechanisms for decision making. In this sense, regardless of the final tangible outputs – the final set of quality of life indicators – the actual process

of collating the data is an end in itself. Community-derived indicators allow individual citizens and communities to express and measure the most important determinants of quality of life for them. These indicators may be monitored in Galway City on an ongoing basis into the future. The development and deployment of community-derived quality of life indicators represent a significant step towards the goal of sustainability in the city.

For Further Information

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The report, **Galway 21: Implementing the Principles and Practices of Sustainable Development in Galway City Council**, by Frances Fahy is published by the Environmental Protection Agency.
(STRIVE Report 17, also available on <http://www.epa.ie/downloads/pubs/research/econ/>)