

LIVING IN SOUTH SOMERSET

A snapshot of the lifestyle and attitudes of
residents from other countries



January 2011



A focus group study funded by South Somerset District Council
under a service level agreement with
MidWest European Communities Association

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BACKGROUND

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This research was funded by South Somerset District Council (SSDC) under a service level agreement with Midwest European Communities Association (MECA). It was facilitated and written independently.

The focus group consisted of residents of South Somerset who had moved to the area from other countries; all had first languages other than English.

A single focus group meeting took place on Sunday January 30 2011, with some gender specific sessions.

OBJECTIVE

The objective was to gain a snapshot of participants' views on SSDC services and to develop an insight into lifestyle factors that might influence the development SSDC and MECA services.

KEY FINDINGS

COUNCIL SERVICES GENERALLY

- Most participants look firstly to MECA for information and advice: convenience and language issues were notable influences
- With regard to expectations of SSDC, being safe, translation services, SSDC links with community groups and support for business were considered high priorities
- People acknowledged and valued the existing partnerships and services to their community
- Translated documents were valued

THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

- Rubbish and recycling collection was generally perceived as good: when looking for information or assistance, language skills were a problem for many
- Over half of the participants knew about Furnicare and comments were positive

- Visits to the countryside proper were rare: the 'unknown', bus reliability and lack of information were issues

LEISURE/CULTURAL SERVICES

- There was little difference between men's and women's use of leisure and cultural services: their needs were not strikingly dissimilar although women expressed more of a desire to meet others and socialise
- Shift work and long hours were key factors stopping people getting involved in clubs or other regular activities
- Knowledge about leisure and cultural services was not good
- Language skills and apprehension about 'the way things were done' stopped some accessing these facilities

WORK

- Moving on to more skilled work was hampered by language skills and qualifications not being recognised
- There was positive interest in the idea of combining interview/job seeking skills training with relevant language skills training: native language courses were also felt to be very helpful

COMMUNITY SAFETY

- Women expressed more concern than men about personal safety in their neighbourhood: unlike men, some also declared that they felt absolutely safe
- Men tended to be 'cautious' when walking alone: some were concerned at times not to expose the fact that they were not British
- Generally, the cohort had few problems that could be attributed to their not being British: some were able to cite specific incidents and none had taken these further
- None of the participants knew about Neighbourhood Watch: the concept seemed unusual to most but several of the male participants expressed an interest in knowing more

HOUSING AND BENEFITS

- These were challenging areas for people and responses indicate a very clear need for ongoing support

STUDY DESIGN

No participant profiling was indicated, other than a requirement for gender specific data. 16 people were recruited by open invitation by MECA; 9 women and 7 men.

Discussion was based around a topic plan and schedule and this was discussed with both parties before the session.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Overcoming potential language barriers was the key factor influencing the collection of data; participants spoke 6 languages. Polish interpreting was available although used minimally, as other languages could not be interpreted. Participants were invited to use a 'graffiti wall' during the break, at any time they felt unable to express themselves in English



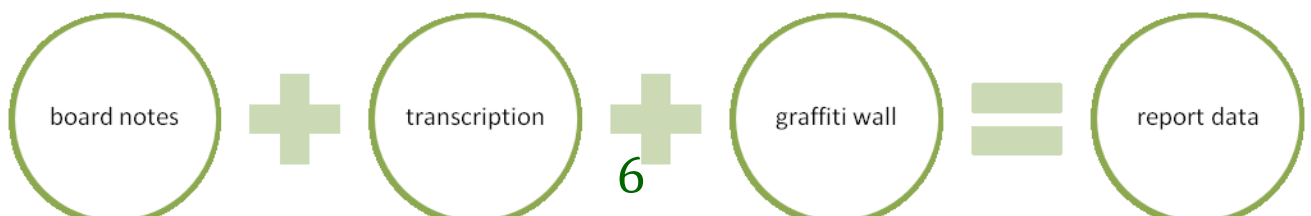
and also specifically, during parts of the meeting.

LOCATION, ACCESS AND TIMING



DATA COLLECTION

It is worth noting that because of the language issues, cited remarks are not verbatim but a fair representation of what was said.



LIMITATIONS

A small scale, one-off study of this kind is best seen as a snapshot or as information to add weight to existing or planned research. It delivers qualitative data and perceptions rather than facts. This type of research can:

- be compared with previous focus group data
- be repeated in the same format over time to compare data
- be a useful adjunct to more extensive or quantitative research with a wider audience, for example a written questionnaire with specific groups
- be useful for comparing expected perceptions with facts
- be used as a starting point as evidence of a need to change (i.e. services)

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Participant information is based on forms completed on arrival. All lived in Chard, Wincanton or Yeovil.

	NUMBER	WORKING	AGE RANGE	YEARS IN UK (approx.)	CHILDREN IN UK*
MALE	7	6	30 - 50	1.5 - 6	3
FEMALE	9	6	36 - 50	1.5 – 6.5	5

* 1 male and 1 female in this study were from the same family

Participants were asked their country of origin and language.

No.	COUNTRY	FIRST LANGUAGE
9	Poland	Polish
2	Thailand	Thai
2	Lithuania	Lithuanian
1	Brazil	Portuguese
1	Lithuania	Russian

1	Slovakia	Hungarian
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TOPIC DATA

SSDC SERVICES GENERAL

As part of the focusing/icebreaker session, small groups were asked to order slips of paper showing areas of council responsibility.

Thinking about what you expect from SSDC, what is most important to you?

GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3	GROUP 4
being safe	being safe	being safe	working with community groups
translation services	working with community groups	translation services	help for businesses
help for businesses	translation services	help for businesses	being safe
rubbish collection	help for businesses	working with community groups	translation services
working with community groups	sports/leisure facilities	rubbish collection	rubbish collection
sports/leisure facilities	rubbish collection	sports/leisure facilities	sports/leisure facilities
arts facilities	voting & having a say	voting & having a say	arts facilities
voting & having a say	arts facilities	arts facilities	voting & having a say

- People valued translation services and the Council's partnerships with the community
- They also wanted to feel safe in their neighbourhoods
- Interestingly, assistance to businesses and the economy was also highly rated

"if everything's ok with businesses then we have jobs"

"if the economy is bad businesses need help...it's a very important thing..."

“no businesses, no work”

- ‘Having a say’ / voting scored low in people’s expectations

“I don’t think I want to say about things happening in the UK!”

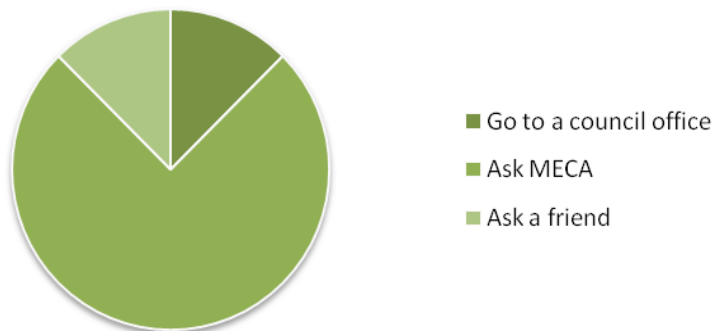
“I don’t have time to think about this”

“... because we have services like translation and MECA it’s maybe not so important. If we didn’t have it, people would want it”

Central government, Somerset County Council, South Somerset District Council: who does what?

- Several participants answered confidently but incorrectly; most did not know
- Only 2 participants knew whether they had voting rights in the UK
- There was some confusion about whether the Council controlled police services

If you had a problem or wanted information with an SSDC service, where would you first go for help?



- 12 of the 16 participants would make MECA their first source of help. As this study was conducted among MECA members this might be expected: it does indicate though, that members value MECA’s services

“I know MECA”

“I can go after work to speak to MECA”

“I can go to the office before my English lesson”

What would help you to get a clear idea of council services?

- On balance, participants were not especially interested in knowing about services until they needed them

“I don’t need to know”

“Maybe translation on a website”

“I can just go and ask; in the council office they are very nice”

“Maybe more information or leaflets at MECA”

THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

How did you find out how often and when your rubbish is collected?

- 2 people asked SSDC by visiting the offices: others asked their landlords or left the rubbish out and waited to see when it was collected
- Language skills were the main factor in determining whether participants contacted SSDC

“I can’t use the phone in English”

“Sometimes they don’t collect it; I don’t know what to do when this happens”

“A while ago, nobody came and the rubbish was everywhere. I phoned and didn’t understand...my neighbour said it was because of the snow”

Do you know what should go into your rubbish and what should be recycled?

- Most had a good idea of this and had seen leaflets
- Only 2 people knew about the Somerset Waste website
- The recycling service was valued

“I think the recycling is very good”

“I like that the rubbish is recycled and it’s always collected on the day”

“It (the service) is mostly very good”

What do you do with your garden waste?

- Only 2 people had gardens; both knew that garden waste could be collected

“I had information on a leaflet”

“My friends told me about this; it’s a good service but you pay I think”

If you had an old washing machine, how would you dispose of it?

- Almost all (14) participants knew about recycling centres
- Only 1 knew that bulky items could be collected for disposal/recycling
- 4 people would refer to their landlord
- About half (7) people knew about Furnicare and this organisation was valued, although about half of these said they would find it a challenge to contact them

“I would ask the shop where I got the new one to take it”

“My landlord does this”

“Furnicare does this...the furniture there is cheap...a good service”

“Furnicare is where I get things for my house: they take your furniture too”

Do you spend time in the countryside? What do you do?

- When asked, most people said they did: however perceptions of what ‘the countryside’ was were worth noting
- Nobody knew what a ‘public right of way’ was or how to identify one
- Nobody knew about areas such as the Glastonbury levels or woodlands
- 4 people did not have a car and all of them indicated that taking buses might be a problem: concerns were raised about getting ‘stuck’ away from town

“ I’ve been to Crewkerne”

“We went to Langport once”

“Yes, I went to the pub in the countryside in Somerton”

“I sometimes go to Ninesprings Park”

“I think I might not be able to get back if the bus doesn’t come”

“Is it the same to get a bus in the countryside as in town?”

LEISURE/CULTURE

For part of this session, we asked men and women separately to express their answers in writing in the language of their choice and post them onto separate ‘walls’. A group discussion followed.

How do you spend your spare time? In particular, have you visited any local museums/theatres? Have you ever been to a leisure centre?

- There were no striking differences in how men and women spent their spare time: activities outside of the home were infrequent for both
- 6 people (3 men and 3 women) had ever visited a leisure centre and only 1 did so regularly: men and women were equally likely to cite time, language issues, not being sure how things ‘worked’ or who was ‘allowed’ to go as reasons for not using these facilities
- 1 man and 1 woman had visited a museum or theatre: lack of interest/not having information was a factor for both genders

What do you do to keep fit and healthy?

- Men were more likely to consider ‘sport’ based and planned activities

Men	Women
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<p>"...walk in the hills near Yeovil..."</p> <p>"...weight training..."</p> <p>"...sports (football) and look after my diet"</p> <p>"...swimming and cycling..."</p> <p>"nothing"</p> <p>"I don't do anything"</p>	<p>"I go for a walk and mind my diet"</p> <p>"I walk every day and eat properly"</p> <p>"I walk a lot with the children and dog"</p> <p>"Walking and cycling sometimes"</p> <p>"Just being busy"</p> <p>"Nothing special"</p> <p>"I have a very busy day"</p>
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- Women, in particular, felt they might be more active in their home countries

"It's easier to do things when your friends are with you"

"I'd probably do much more because I could understand (exercise classes)"

"It's very expensive to join a gym in the UK"

Where do you look for information about spare-time activities?

- Both men and women were unsure of where to find information: women with children seemed to be networking with other parents at school

"I ask parents at school when I want to know about places to go"

"Sometimes we get information through the children at school"

"We go some places because the children have to go"

If you had no barriers, what would you like to do in your spare time? What stops you from doing this? Would you like to meet more people socially?

- Both men and women equally cited 'time' and 'language issues' as reasons for not taking part in more social activities: money was less of an issue
- Women expressed more of an interest in this than men (7 of 9 vs 2 of 7)

“Too tired after work to do much...I often work for 10 hours”

“Because I work shifts, it’s difficult to join in a regular activity”

“I work variable hours and sometimes things aren’t open or happening when I want”

"I don't know when you can go there (leisure centre) and who is allowed to go"

"It's hard to find time to have lessons, go to work, look after children and keep fit"

"I think maybe it's quite expensive and then I'll have to go away and feel embarrassed"

“I meet some people at English lessons”

“To have English lessons on different days is a good thing...if I’m working I can still go”

“I would like to (meet more people) but my English isn’t good”

WORK

We wanted to know about work patterns and satisfaction.

Is the work you are doing here the same as the work you would be doing in your home country?

- There were no gender distinctions: 4 of 6 working men and 4 of 6 working women indicated that the work they were doing was similar to that which they would do in their home country
- Issues for the others were language skills and recognition of qualifications
- During the discussion, several people expressed an interest in skills training or interview training linked to English language teaching

“I’m a nurse, but my qualifications aren’t recognised”

“I can do the job but my English isn’t good enough to go to college (to do a course)”

“It’s easier to do a job where I don’t have to speak to people”

“Going to agencies is easy but not applying for jobs from a newspaper”

Have you ever thought about running your own business? What do you know about the advice and practical help that is available?

- Nobody knew about the kinds of business support available in the UK

“I don’t know how long I will be here”

“If I stay for a long time, I might”

“When my English is a bit better...”

COMMUNITY SAFETY

We first had a short session to make distinctions between ‘crime’ and ‘community safety’. We again invited men and women to express their answers in writing in the language of their choice and post them onto separate ‘walls’. A group discussion followed.

- Perhaps reflecting problems evident in areas of high density housing, over half of the participants said that they were troubled by litter, noise, drunk youngsters, dog mess and rowdiness from nearby pubs.

Generally, do you feel safe where you live?

We asked people to score out of 10 how safe they felt walking around their neighbourhood in the evening. (where 10 is ‘very safe’)

Women	1 1 1 1 2 7 8 8 10
Men	4 4 6 7 7 8 8

- Women who did not feel safe were especially troubled by groups of rowdy teenagers
- Men were concerned about groups of young men and several indicated that they sometimes avoided exposing the fact that they were not English

Is road safety a problem in your neighbourhood? What is the problem?

- Nobody was concerned about speeding cars but 4 people were concerned about the number of cars and parking problems
- Understanding road signs was not a problem for those in this cohort
- One person could not cross the road with children due to heavy traffic in Yeovil (Sherborne Road) due to a lack of signal lights for pedestrians.

“ I worry about my car; there’s a lot of rowdiness at the pub”

“There are too many cars to go fast!”

Do you feel integrated in your local community? Do you have English friends?

- 12 participants had English friends but only a couple regarded them as good friends
- 4 people did not socialise at all with English colleagues at work
- There was some evidence of poor community relations

“I had a problem with my neighbours...they attacked us and put rubbish in the garden, (the Council) were not interested in dealing with it”

“At work we don’t speak to the English people”

Are you a member of Neighbourhood Watch or another local action group? If not, would you like to be?

- Nobody recognised the Neighbourhood Watch logo: couple thought they ‘might’ have heard about it
- When it was explained, men in particular thought it was a good idea and said they would like to know more although the concept was alien to some

HOUSING AND BENEFITS

If you had to move house tomorrow, where would you go for information on housing? What’s your biggest problem finding accommodation?

- Most people indicated that they would ask friends, look in a newspaper or contact an agency
- Almost all participants said the thing that would most hamper their search for accommodation would be using the telephone in English

“I don’t understand the rent agreement”

“I only know to look in the newspaper or ask MECA”

“The hardest thing is to use the phone to discuss this”

“It’s hard if you are doing temporary work through an agency”

Do you understand what Council Tax is and what the money is used for?

- People had a general idea of what Council Tax was used for and most had acquired this knowledge through friends or MECA advice services
- 10 people recalled having seen a leaflet explaining Council Tax but only 1 could understand it
- There was some interest in finding out more about Council Tax spend

If you have claimed housing benefit or council tax benefit, how did you find that process?

- Those few who had claimed Council Tax found the process difficult and all had made errors with their applications, sometimes resulting in overpayments being made

“I just didn’t understand the form”

“I got it wrong and was overpaid; MECA are helping to sort it out”

“I didn’t know MECA could help with this so I didn’t apply”

“It’s impossible to understand”

“I didn’t know how to tell them when my situation changed; my English isn’t good enough to telephone”

FACILITATOR’S COMMENT

Residents from overseas can be hard to reach in many areas. Thanks to partnerships between local authorities, police and community groups, developed in particular since the early wave of migrant workers in 2005, South Somerset has a sound foundation of support for these groups of people.

This support was noted by the cohort. They especially commented on advice services, English lessons at convenient times and locations, the availability translated documents and native language support services. Notable challenges were those that might be expected: language, cultural misunderstanding and work-related issues were at the fore.

MAKING USE OF THE DATA

It seemed clear that improving services and information for non-native speakers is not necessarily dependent on policy changes or funding. Many needs might be met by targeting services to synergistic benefit.

As this focus group research was undertaken on behalf of a third party, recommendations for action are inappropriate without further discussion. There would indeed appear to be a number of inexpensive and easy-to-implement actions which can be taken forward. Prompt response to the points raised in the report is important; obviously, the validity of attitudinal data is time limited.

A verbal presentation of this report, its implications and suggestions for action is available.

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