



## Evaluation of Virtual Ward Panel Pilot – Executive Summary

### Abstract

The virtual ward panel (VWP) pilot used online surveys to engage communities in the process of influencing policing at a local level. Forty nine surveys were distributed across four police services and proved successful at engaging local members of the public, including targeting under-represented groups. A large majority of respondents stated that they were more informed about what police and local authorities were doing to tackle crime and were more satisfied with their performance. Police and local authority staff were very positive about the initiative which required minimal input of resources although results were considerably improved when the approach was championed by senior officers.

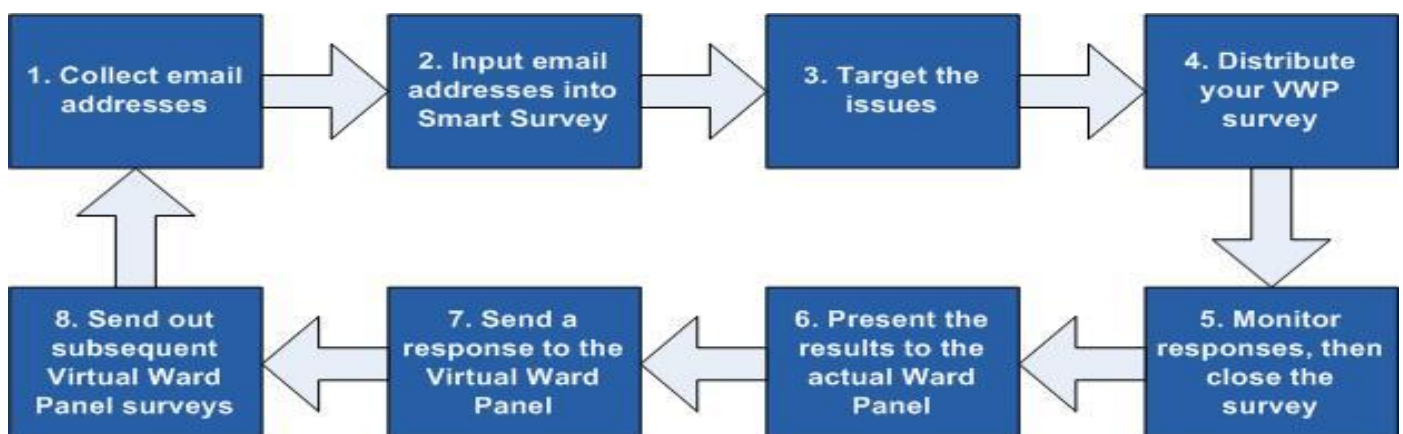
### The pilot

Westminster City Council received funding from Capital Ambition to develop an approach for consulting with local communities on a virtual basis to get their views on local crime and disorder concerns with the twin aims of:

- Engaging more local people in the work of their Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) and
- Engaging a more diverse range of local people in discussions about crime issues.

An innovative approach was developed which involved sending residents a link by email to a survey asking them to prioritise their concerns about local crime issues. Survey results were automatically collated by the survey software and were presented to real-world panels where they influenced local policing decisions. SNTs then fed back the actions they had taken in response to these priorities. Owing to interest in the project from the Home Office and ACPO, the pilot was extended to four police services and thirty two different SNTs administered a total of 49 surveys.

The co-ordinator developed a clear process for the effective implementation of virtual ward panels:



The graphic below shows a typical result of a virtual survey automatically collated by the survey software:

**1. Please indicate your level of concern about the following issues which have been identified by your Ward Panel and Safer Neighbourhood Police team as possibly of some priority in your neighbourhood at the moment.** (Show Percentages)

|   | No personal concern | Little concern | Some concern | Great concern | Critical | Responses |
|---|---------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|----------|-----------|
| Anti Social Behaviour and Criminal Damage in Pulham Avenue, Allard Way and Trafalgar Avenue in Broxbourne | 36                  | 10             | 27           | 17            | 4        | 94        |
| Off Road Motorbikes in Bramble Lane Hoddesdon   | 41                  | 15             | 29           | 7             | 1        | 93        |
| Anti Social Behaviour in Hoddesdon Town Centre  | 4                   | 8              | 40           | 33            | 8        | 93        |
| Anti Social Behaviour in Broxbourne High Road and Station Road  | 13                  | 7              | 31           | 34            | 11       | 96        |
| Garage and Shed Burglaries in Broxbourne  | 14                  | 7              | 32           | 34            | 7        | 94        |
| Speeding and Overweight Vehicles using Cock Lane Hoddesdon  | 14                  | 14             | 27           | 19            | 17       | 91        |
| Vehicles Speeding in Charlton Mead Lane   | 26                  | 16             | 33           | 16            | 2        | 93        |

KEY ANALYSIS Statistics based on 96 respondent(s) 0 skipped.

### Additional Reporting

**1.1. Anti Social Behaviour and Criminal Damage in Pulham Avenue, Allard Way and Trafalgar Avenue in Broxbourne**

|   |                     | Response Percent | Response Total |
|---|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1 | No personal concern | 38.3%            | 36             |
| 2 | Little concern      | 10.6%            | 10             |
| 3 | Some concern        | 28.7%            | 27             |
| 4 | Great concern       | 18.1%            | 17             |
| 5 | Critical            | 4.3%             | 4              |

Statistics based on 94 respondent(s). 2 skipped.

**1.2. Off Road Motorbikes in Bramble Lane Hoddesdon**

|   |                     | Response Percent | Response Total |
|---|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1 | No personal concern | 44.1%            | 41             |
| 2 | Little concern      | 16.1%            | 15             |
| 3 | Some concern        | 31.2%            | 29             |
| 4 | Great concern       | 7.5%             | 7              |
| 5 | Critical            | 1.1%             | 1              |

Statistics based on 93 respondent(s). 3 skipped.

## Results of the evaluation

1086 members of the public responded to these 49 surveys. Each survey was distributed to an average of 85 people and received an average of 22 responses. On average, nine out of these 22 respondents provided extra information on local crime issues via the free text box. This represents a very healthy response rate of 26% with 11% of those contacted providing additional views and information. The average response rate of 22 compared favourably with attendance rates at real-world ward panels which were typically in the range of 6-8 members of the public.

## Speed of completion

We analysed a sample consisting of the largest survey from each of five different SNTs (a total of 206 respondents) and found that 81% completed the survey in less than 5 minutes with 59% completing it in less than 2 minutes.

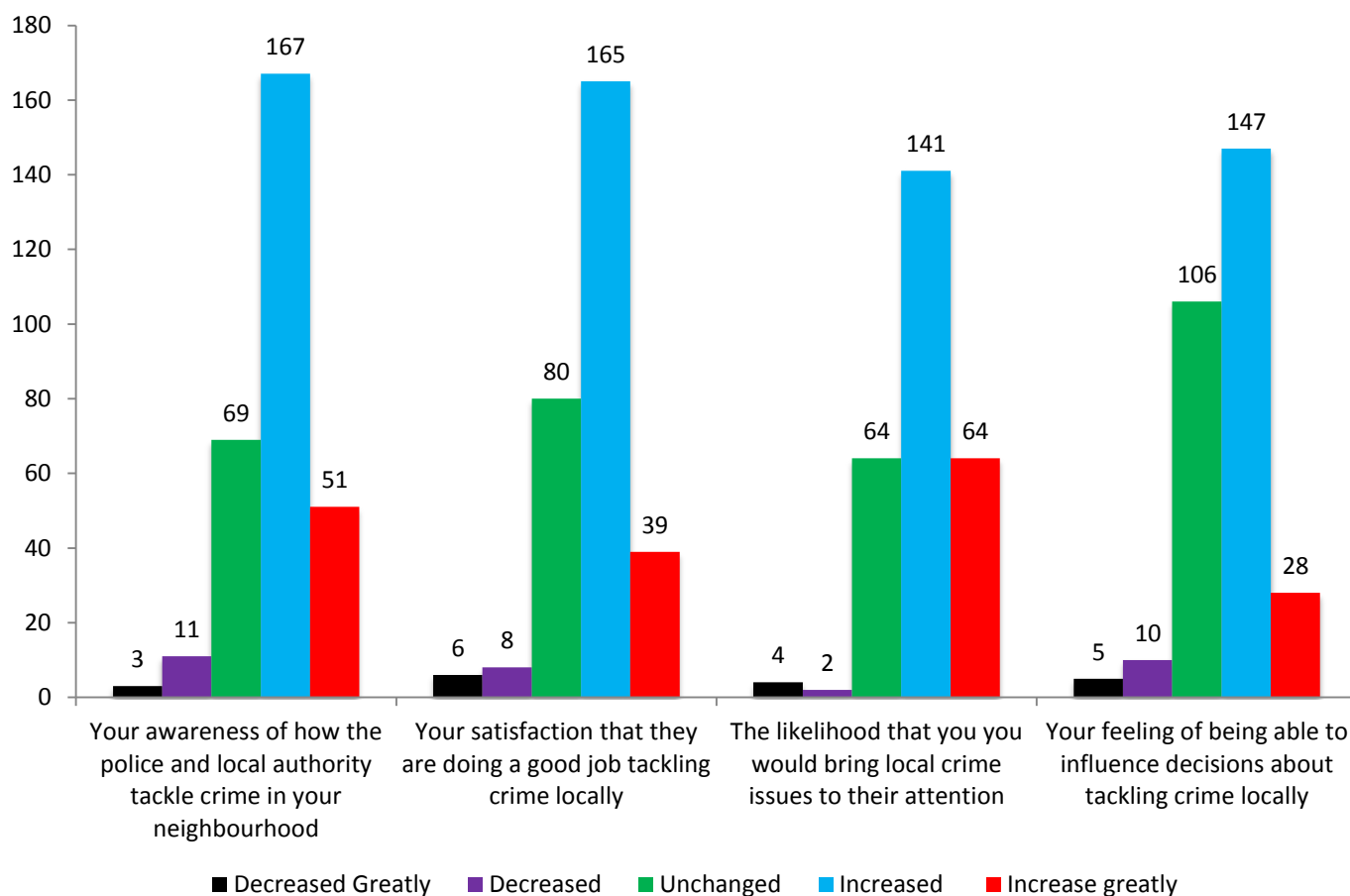
## The views of stakeholders

We undertook 22 interviews with members of SNTs, ward panel chairs and relevant local authority staff. All our interviewees were very positive about the virtual ward panel approach. They found the system easy to administer and were particularly positive about the high response rates. A number of SNTs successfully targeted local ethnic groups who were currently under-represented at real-world panels.

Interviewees also reported that the VWP approach helped tackle the problem of the high number of *'single issue advocates'* who attended real ward panels regularly to complain about such issues as dog fouling or cycling on pavements with the result that a disproportionate amount of time and energy both at meetings and in policing activity were directed at matters which were of limited concern to most local residents. The introduction of findings from VWP surveys helped to move discussions on and establish a different and more representative set of local priorities. Interviewees agreed that although VWPs produced very good returns for limited investment, they should remain as just one component in local community engagement strategies – it was not felt that they should replace face-to-face engagement.

## The views of members of the public

An evaluation survey was distributed by five SNTs gathering a total of 312 responses. Participants were asked four key questions about how participation in the virtual surveys had affected their views around local crime issues. The figure below summarises their responses:



It is clear that members of the public were very positive about the VWP approach, a fact confirmed by the 92% of respondents who stated that they would be prepared to fill in future online surveys about crime and antisocial behaviour.

### **Critical success factors.**

We identified five critical success factors for the operation of VWPs:

1. The appointment of a VWP Champion is critical to drive forward the implementation of virtual surveys and to ensure that they are integrated within an overall engagement approach. The champion is in a position to resolve many minor problems and tackle any barriers or obstacles. He/she also enables a police area to adopt a consistent approach to digital engagement. To be effective the VWP champion needs to be of Inspector rank or higher.
2. The general promotion of the VWP approach and the integration of collecting e-mail addresses throughout everyday police work is important in order to maximise local representation. Victims of crime are often particularly willing to provide e-mail addresses. Specific initiatives should be undertaken to target under-represented groups.
3. The selection and description of local issues of concern is critical to gain the attention and participation of local people. The identification of specific, current local issues gives members of the public the confidence that their local police are aware of local problems and that their own views are likely to be valued.
4. A key component of the VWP approach is to ensure that police take action to address the local priorities and concisely feedback progress to survey respondents.
5. In order to retain members of the public in the process, it is important to limit the number of surveys to no more than 3 to 4 per year. Similarly, the issues raised in surveys should change over time so that people are not asked to comment repeatedly on the same concerns.

### **Key questions for the future**

It is clear that a digital approach is going to be a substantial component of police services' approach to engagement in the future. There appear to be three main challenges if the VWP approach is to be implemented widely and over the medium-long term:

1. If the number of people responding to virtual surveys continues to grow, it will be important to define the exact nature and importance of virtual and real world ward panels and to establish effective links between them.
2. There will be a need to understand further and develop the most effective approach of keeping members of the public completing virtual surveys over the medium-long term.
3. Police services and their local authorities will need to streamline and harmonise their digital engagement processes to retain local people in the process and ensure that they do not disengage through 'survey fatigue'.

The full report can be downloaded from: <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/capitalambition/>