Life around Cambridge

Results from the Cambridge Ahead Quality of Life Survey

Through an employee survey, we found that making the Cambridge area a better place to live requires a rounded approach. People who work in Cambridge live across a wide area. Housing and traffic were the greatest concerns, while leisure, education and health were associated with local area satisfaction. Good employment opportunities are important for quality of life but are not seen as a local issue.
RAND Europe recently carried out a survey about quality of life among people who work in Cambridge, and found some surprising results. The survey was carried out for Cambridge Ahead, an organisation representing employers based in Cambridge, and we were hoping to get a better understanding of how different aspects of life affected overall satisfaction, and people’s satisfaction with their local area. It turns out that some factors important for overall life satisfaction are not nearly as important to a person’s satisfaction with their local area.

People who work in Cambridge cover a very wide geographical spread. Half of our respondents lived outside the city with commutes of more than five miles. More than a quarter had commutes of over 12 miles, and more than one in ten travelled over 20 miles to work in Cambridge. If employers in Cambridge want to improve quality of life for their employees, then they have to think beyond the city itself.

Overall, housing and traffic were the topics that people were least satisfied with, with average scores of 1.91 and 1.93 out of 5 respectively (everything else scored more than 3.5). But the quality of life picture was more complicated than that, since we were looking at people’s satisfaction with their local area as well. So while we expected that housing and traffic would rate highly in our analysis of which factors were most associated with local area satisfaction, this was not the case.

In terms of local area satisfaction, traffic came fifth out of the seven factors we considered, with a change of one standard deviation associated with a change of only 0.07-0.08 standard deviations (compared with 0.3-0.4 for the highest scorer). Housing came bottom; in fact, at the 95% significance level, there wasn’t sufficient evidence to conclude that housing had any effect on local area satisfaction at all.

Why did this happen? One explanation is that market forces are at work: if housing is more affordable, that compensates for other deficiencies in the locality, and traffic is better in areas where nobody wants to go. Our model accounted for a lot of factors that would make a locality less desirable, but we couldn’t account for everything. One plausible explanation is distance from Cambridge, which was the closest city for most of our respondents. Cheaper housing and less congestion could be indicators of being further from Cambridge; although these are good things in their own right, they are balanced out by the fact that it takes longer to get to work and to major retail and leisure facilities.

Another result of interest related to employment opportunities. We had treated this as a local issue: clearly some areas are much more economically vibrant than others. However, the analysis showed that people did not particularly change their opinion of their local area based on employment opportunities (its coefficient was just 0.06-0.07). Employment opportunities did, however, have a big influence on people’s overall life satisfaction (coefficient 0.2). So it wasn’t the case that people didn’t care about it: they just didn’t think that it said much about their local area. In light of our finding about how far people travelled, this makes sense – the workplace, and employment opportunities in general, could be some distance from where they actually lived.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with local services on a scale of 1 to 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing affordability</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of traffic</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to neighbourhood</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure facilities in general</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of schools</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local GPs</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment opportunities</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were some interesting differences with age. For example, young people felt increasingly locked out of the housing market, with 78% of those aged 16-24 reporting that they struggled to get onto the property ladder, compared with only 30% of over-65s saying that they struggled.

The research team were divided on whether or not it was surprising that a feeling of belonging to a neighbourhood had the greatest effect on local area satisfaction, with a coefficient of 0.3-0.4. Some of us felt that this was almost synonymous with asking if people were satisfied with their local area. However, others thought it perfectly possible to be impressed by opportunities to eat, drink and be entertained without feeling part of a real community.

So what does all this mean for Cambridge employers and strategies to improve overall quality of life for those who work in Cambridge but may live 20 miles away? The main message from the survey is that the picture is complicated; satisfaction with local services, with the local area and overall life satisfaction cannot all be addressed by tackling the same issues. Housing and traffic are in most urgent need of improvement in terms of overall satisfaction, but investing in local leisure facilities and health services would have a bigger effect on people’s opinions of where they actually live. Improving (or maintaining) employment opportunities would have an effect on people’s overall life satisfaction, but those opportunities do not have to be on the doorstep. In short, making the Cambridge area a better place to live requires a rounded approach.

**Facts and figures**

- 4882 employees of 30 Cambridge-based organisations responded to the survey.
- 11% of respondents travel more than 20 miles to work in Cambridge.
- 76% of respondents disagree with the statement ‘housing in my area is affordable’.
- 78% of 16-24-year olds struggle to get onto the property ladder compared with 30% of over-65s.
- 77% of respondents are dissatisfied with the level of weekday traffic.
- 80% of respondents are satisfied with employment opportunities.
- Belonging to a neighbourhood and the quality of leisure facilities are the biggest drivers of local-area satisfaction.
Where do people who work in Cambridge live?

This summary describes work done by RAND Europe documented in "Satisfaction with life and local area among people who work in the Cambridge area" by Bryn Garrod, Catherine L. Saunders, Marco Hafner and Christian van Stolk, RR-1123-CA, 2015 (available at www.rand.org/t/rr1123). To view this summary online, visit www.rand.org/t/rb9856. RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND Europe's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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