

Creating a Liveability Indicator: The Neighbourhood Liveability Assessment Survey (NLAS)

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the methodological problem of how to operationalise and measure 'liveability'. Liveability is prominent in New Labour policy discourse and is a theme which overlaps several policy areas concerning neighbourhoods and communities in urban areas. The paper proposes that liveability is a prime cause of neighbourhood-level change in England, especially demand for housing. Whilst liveability is often discussed in this context, objective and reliable measures for it are not. The development and application of a new method, the Neighbourhood Liveability Assessment Survey (NLAS), is explained as a means of deriving a composite index of liveability that takes into account residents' priorities. The NLAS should improve the breadth and quality of research into the effects of neighbourhood level intervention.

Such a tool is essential if practitioners and policy makers want to observe and evaluate the impact of their programmes over time.

Since the late 1990s low housing demand and neighbourhood decline have been regarded as particular issues in parts of the Midlands and the North of England. The role of micro-social processes at the neighbourhood level have received particular attention recently because they are the most tangible evidence of change. Agencies delivering Housing Market Renewal programmes are collecting a growing body of small-area data on demographic and socioeconomic neighbourhood attributes but are drawing on secondary data, often from administrative sources.

This contrasts with the lack of measures of the direct experience of the environment and condition of a neighbourhood, which can be summed up as 'liveability'. The NLAS aims to fill this gap in the context of a Housing Market Renewal Partnership in the North East of England, 'Tees Valley Living'.

Observable signs of disorder and the design of the built environment influence well-being and neighbourhood satisfaction. This links to how people, with economic means, choose where to live. Indeed, residents' views about improvements needed in their neighbourhood are dominated by liveability issues such as low level crime and the quality of local green spaces and parks. It is what the neighbourhood looks like, in terms of design and how well it is cared for, that appears to be behind these perceptions and therefore the NLAS is a visual inspection of a neighbourhood, performed on foot. A literature review guided the selection of survey items and a consultation exercise allowed resident priorities to be incorporated into the NLAS score with the use of weightings.

Key Words: neighbourhood, liveability, site-survey