

INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS) was the twenty-eighth comprehensive assessment of tenants' attitudes to be carried out by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive since 1994. An independent social research company, Perceptive Insight, was commissioned to conduct the fieldwork and process the data. The Housing Executive's Research Unit conducted the analysis and interpretation of the results.

The CTOS is a cornerstone of the Housing Executive's service delivery in terms of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). The Survey supports the Housing Executive's applications for Customer Service Excellence (CSE) and the NI Quality Award; it is also linked to the high level organisational outcomes set out in the Housing Executive's Corporate Plan:

1. Helping people find housing support and solutions
2. Delivering better homes
3. Fostering vibrant sustainable communities
4. Delivering quality public services

The CTOS monitors the level of customer satisfaction with Housing Executive services and identifies areas for improvement. The continuous nature of the survey, where information is gathered on an ongoing basis throughout the year, helps reduce bias from any media coverage which might affect how respondents answer questions or by events such as the annual rent review.

The survey was carried out over twelve months, from January 2021 to December 2021. The questionnaire consisted of a main section, which was used in each of the four data collection periods, and an omnibus section, which changed each period. The omnibus section allows client groups within the Housing Executive to carry out very specific research and achieve results quickly which can be linked to general data collected in the main section e.g. socio-economic characteristics, dwelling type or geographic location. Findings from each omnibus topic were reported at the end of the data collection period.

As in previous years, the main section of the questionnaire in 2021 covered the following areas:

- economic and demographic household information;
- tenure history;
- type of contact with the Housing Executive in the last 12 months;
- tenant generated repairs;
- tenant appraisal of service provision;
- attitude to area or estate;
- financial inclusion; and
- digital inclusion.

AIMS OF THE SURVEY

The main aims of the CTOS are

- to provide a comprehensive picture of Housing Executive tenants and their views and attitudes to service provision in 2021 at Northern Ireland, and Regional level;
- to facilitate a comparative analysis of tenants' views over time;
- to allow collection of specific information for various client groups in the Housing Executive, to inform the formulation of future policy or programmes; and
- to allow the flexibility associated with rapid response by the Research Unit to specific issues without the delays and expense associated with the commissioning of individual small surveys.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The sample was designed at a target of 200 interviews (50 per quarter) in each of the 13 Areas; with findings reported at Northern Ireland, Regional and Area levels.

Random sampling was carried out quarterly, beginning in January 2021 (for the January to March data collection period), from the Housing Executive's HMS database.

By the end of the year, in December 2021, 2,600 tenants had taken part in the Survey. Appendix tables include base totals; thus, tables showing results for questions asked of all respondents have a base of 2,600 (i.e. the total number of respondents who participated in the survey).

The conduct of the fieldwork is summarised as follows:

- interviews were carried out at a rate of approximately 16-17 per month in each Area;
- approximately 50 tenants were interviewed per Area, per quarter;
- 2,600 tenants in 13 Areas were interviewed over the year.

COVID-19 Response

Two thirds of the way through Quarter 1 (January-March) 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. This had an impact on how CTOS interviews were conducted. A move from face to face interviews to telephone interviews was successfully adapted. This remains the main means of contact.

In order to ensure a 100 per cent response rate, the CTOS operated a system of substitution. Each quarter a substitute sample of reserve addresses were randomly selected. If any tenant could not be contacted after three calls, or if they were ill, or if they did not want to participate in the survey, they were replaced by another tenant within the same local area. Due to the pandemic and change in methodology the decision was made to over sample the list of reserve addresses to allow for optimum response rates. It was also agreed that five telephone attempts should be made before referring to the reserve sample for that area.

Margin of Error

The proportion of respondents interviewed in a survey that give a particular answer is only an estimate of the proportion of all tenants who would have given that answer: i.e. there is room for error, plus or minus the margin of error. The size of the error varies with the size of the percentage and the sample size. Table A1 gives margins of error for various percentages and sample sizes at Northern Ireland and Regional levels; at the 95% confidence level; 95% confidence means that if the same survey were carried out for 20 samples, exactly the same results would be obtained in 19 of those cases.

If a survey has a margin of error of 2.5 per cent, it means that if the survey was conducted 100 times – asking a different sample of people each time – the overall percentage of people who responded the same way would remain within 2.5 per cent of the original result in at least 95 of those 100 surveys. For example, for a finding of 80% at the Northern Ireland level (2,600) the probable margin of error is ± 1.5 . This means there are 95 chances in 100 that the true figure lies between 78.5% and 81.5%.

Table A1: Margin of Error at Northern Ireland and Area levels

		%	5 or 95	10 or 90	15 or 85	20 or 80	25 or 75	30 or 70	35 or 65	40 or 60	45 or 55	50 or 50
Location	Sample Size											
Area	200		3.0	4.2	5.0	5.6	6.0	6.4	6.6	6.8	6.9	6.9
Belfast	800		1.5	2.1	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.5
South	1,000		1.4	1.9	2.2	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.1
North	800		1.5	2.1	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.5
N Ireland	2,600		0.8	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.9	1.9

It is not possible to report on all data collected by the CTOS, in part due to the small number of responses received from some sub-groups of tenants regarding specific topics. Therefore, questions relating to some sub-groups are too small for detailed analysis. However, where Regional and Area management teams still require some information on the responses of these sub-groups, where possible, this is delivered separately on request to the CTOS Team.

WEIGHTING AND GROSSING

Each Area has a different number of households within its occupied stock, but all had the same sample size of 200 households per year. Thus, for example, an Area office with 2,000 households would have to have its sample results multiplied by ten ($2,000 \div 200$), but an Area office with 6,000 households would have its sample results multiplied by thirty ($6,000 \div 200$). The difference between these factors is known as the weighting and means that the percentages for Northern Ireland and Regions take account of the different Area office sizes. The multiplication to known actual totals is called grossing. In practical terms, for this Survey, the weighting and grossing factors are combined.

Different factors were calculated and applied for omnibus sections which were in the field for different numbers of data collection periods.

PARTICIPATION IN THE SURVEY

Perceptive Insight sent a letter to all tenants selected for the Survey at least two weeks before interviewers telephoned them. This letter introduced tenants to the Survey, explaining the background as well as the aims and objectives. Participation in the Survey was voluntary. Experienced social research interviewers carried out the interviews with the respondents via telephone. Interviews lasted on average thirty-five to forty minutes and respondents were assured that information given would not be passed on outside the Research Unit in a way that could identify them or their household.

Perceptive Insight also conducted a 10% back-check of all interviews. Around 260 tenants who had taken part in the Survey were selected at random and telephoned, shortly after their interview.

Tenants were asked some of the key questions again and responses were checked with their original answers. Also, tenants were asked if the original interview had been conducted and whether the interviewer had identified themselves before conducting the survey.

CATI

Perceptive Insight interviewers administered the questionnaire, via telephone with respondents, using a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology. Individual interviews lasted between 35 to 40 minutes and this remains the main method of data capture.

HOW TO INTERPRET THE RESULTS OF THIS SURVEY

Sample surveys are used to overcome the constraints on research that arise due to time, cost and manpower. Sample design seeks to be representative as possible of the full survey population and an Area sample size of 200 households is twice the 100 minimum sample size for valid results, where a line of questioning applies to all or most of the respondents. However, it must be remembered that all sample surveys are subject to sample errors as set out in the margin of error table on page 44.

Therefore, some of the differences between Areas in a given year and from year to year within the same Area may be more apparent than real.

While addresses have been selected at random, the overriding need to achieve an equal number of responses in each Area has necessitated the use of substitute addresses. This compromise, while it achieves the object of equal achieved sample size, and hence equal sample error, may have been at the expense of some incalculable, but probably small, variations in the validity of the results. As in any survey, there is also the possibility, (which survey managers try to minimise by uniform training) that there may be some interviewer variation. This may take the form of inflection in asking questions, which may result in differing reaction by respondents, or a propensity to interpret respondents' answers differently. On balance, it is desirable, from the point of view of the interviewers reaching the correct addresses that each interviewer remains in the same area throughout the survey. The drawback to this practice is that such interviewer variation will be perpetuated throughout the year and some apparent differences may be created.

Where the Research Unit notices patterns of differential results between Areas within a year, or year-to-year changes in an individual area, these are drawn to the attention of the fieldwork contractor who conducts appropriate checks with the fieldwork staff. Unfortunately, some of the differences only become apparent when the complete annual sample is analysed, when it may be too late to take appropriate avoiding action.

None of these potential problems are unique to the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey - they also apply to surveys conducted wholly in-house and must be accepted as one of the facts of life of conducting research. The alternative, a 100% survey, is typified by the Census of Population, which requires a design and organisation lead-in period of several years, and a corresponding data preparation and analysis period after the Census date. This post-survey delay reduces the relevance of the results.