

Aberdeenshire
COUNCIL



RESIDENTS SURVEY 2002

Final Report

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**Aberdeenshire Council
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PART 1

Residents Focus Groups

1.0 Executive summary of the residents focus groups

- 1.1 This document summarises the key themes emerging from a programme of focus groups undertaken by T.L. Dempster Strategy and Research on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council during April and May 2002.

A total of 12 groups were undertaken. Of these, six were with S5/S6 pupils in schools throughout the council area. A further six were with adults. These groups were recruited to be split evenly between males and females and under/over 40s. A total of 56 people attended these six groups. Two groups (one with pupils, one with adults) were held in each of the six recognised council areas.

- 1.2 In part, the purpose of the groups was to help inform the content of the council's annual residents survey, fieldwork for which is ongoing. However, the groups also provided substantive feedback to the council, albeit of a qualitative nature.

The key issues emerging are summarised herein. The topic guide used for the focus groups is set out in Appendix 1. The scribe's/ facilitator's notes from each group are set out in Appendix 2.

An overview of the key themes emerging from each group is set out in Appendix 3. The key conclusions are summarised below.

- 1.3 There is variable awareness of the services for which the council is responsible. In particular, many residents believe its powers to be more extensive than they are in reality.

- 1.4 The expectation which Aberdeenshire residents have of a "good" local authority can be summed up in the following "scorecard":

- efficient
- delivering quality outputs ("gets the job done")
- accessible
- co-ordinated
- focused on the different needs of its communities
- fair
- trustworthy
- willing to listen
- independent
- visibly engaged with local communities
- advocacy.

- 1.5 There are generally positive views of the council in relation to the following aspects of the "scorecard":

- stability
- accessibility
- fair
- trustworthy.

There are mixed views in relation to the following aspects:

- co-ordination of service delivery
- delivering quality outputs
- being focused on the different needs of its communities
- willingness to listen
- independence.

There are generally negative perceptions with regard to:

- efficiency
- being visibly engaged in local communities
- adopting an advocacy role for Aberdeenshire.

- 1.6** Underlying perceptions of the council suggest a perception that the council is committed to improvement but, in common with other local authorities, is seen as slow and cumbersome.
- 1.7** Modest concerns are evident with regards to the speed of complaint handling. Most dissatisfaction arises from the outcome of the complaints process rather than its handling.
- 1.8** The key dimensions which residents believe would constitute “social responsibility” on the part of the council would include the following:
- environmental policies
 - consultation
 - plain language
 - encouragement of personal responsibility.
- 1.9** Web usage is limited amongst the adult population, but in the norm amongst S5/S6 pupils. There is little conception of how council services could be delivered online, but a strong belief that the “style” of the site would be very important.
- 1.10** The key themes which residents see as being potentially part of the council’s wider role are often, at least partly, within its existing remit:
- improving the physical environment of towns and villages;
 - specifically, addressing the problem of empty shops;
 - establishing things for young people to do;
 - enhancing bus services, particularly in rural areas;
 - encouraging a greater sense of community spirit through community social events.
- 1.11** Amongst the issues of specific concern, or interest, to S5/S6 pupils are the following:
- schools
 - “places to hang out”
 - buses
 - the discount card concept.
- 1.12** The issues raised in the focus groups were further investigated in the council’s annual quantitative residents survey, the results of which are discussed in the following section.

2.0 Perception of council responsibilities

2.1 In general, the public's knowledge of those areas for which the council is responsible are relatively vague. When asked the question: "What services do you think Aberdeenshire Council is responsible for?" Most respondents will identify a range of visible, universal services:

- refuse collection
- street lighting
- parks
- roads maintenance
- street cleaning
- libraries and museums.

General perceptions of the council are conditioned greatly by its performance in the delivery of these universal services.

2.2 Typically, fewer respondents would name services which are specific to certain client groups (most commonly when they were part of this client group):

- planning
- housing
- social work
- education.

Although less prevalent, people within these relevant client groups often had fairly intense feelings about the council (positive or negative) based on their previous experiences.

Education was an important area where there was a much less clear association, in respondents' minds, with the council. This was even the case in some on the pupils' focus groups.

2.3 Interestingly, a common (almost universal) theme was of residents ascribing wider powers to the council than is in reality the case. Examples included:

- water and sewerage
- health
- operation of buses.

This is an important issue for the council as perceptions of its performance can be influenced by factors which are at least partially, and often substantially, outwith its control. Fairly intense, and negative, observations were made about bus transport in many of the groups. For example, in relation to expense, frequency and lack of buses at suitable times (mainly late night).

3.0 Expectations of a “good” local authority

3.1 Respondents were asked the question: “How would you describe a “good” Local Authority?” The key themes emerging from this discussion have been synthesised into the “scorecard” which is summarised in 3.2 below. This is a means of identifying those factors, which are most important to residents, and subsequently, of considering how well the council is performing in relation to these issues.

3.2 Whilst different language was used in different groups, residents’ expectations of the council can be summarised by the 11 themes which make up the “scorecard” (these are presented in no particular order of priority):

- efficient
- delivering quality outputs (“gets the job done”)
- accessible
- co-ordinated
- focused on the different needs of its communities
- fair
- trustworthy
- willing to listen
- independent
- visibly engaged with local communities
- advocacy.

A qualitative overview of perceptions relative to the “scorecard” is summarised in the following section.

4.0 Perceptions of Aberdeenshire Council performance

4.1 For being *efficient*, the council is usually described as “poor” or “middle of the road”. In part, this is due to long standing perceptions about efficiency in the public sector generally. However, perceptions were also consolidated by specific experiences. For example:

- School pupils identifying irrational investment decisions which they perceived were forced on schools by inflexible budget procedures.
- Examples of rework having to be undertaken, for example in relation to roads maintenance.
- Perceived wastefulness at the end of a financial year.

One area where the council is rated “positively” is in relation to the collection of council tax: “*They are efficient at getting your money off you*”.

There is widespread appreciation that the council is facing budgetary constraints and that it can become “a target for gripes”. Despite this, there remains a feeling that the council could provide better value and that it is “over-managed”.

It is also worth noting, in passing, that there is only a limited appreciation that council tax revenues make up a small part of the council's overall budget.

- 4.2** In relation to *delivering quality outputs* (or “getting the job done”) the council is seen as “better than some”. The picture generally is a mixed one with some services receiving positive comment:
- planning
 - waste disposal
 - “getting better at recycling”.

Other areas attract generally negative observations:

- winter road maintenance
- education
- management of traffic flows.

As noted above, there is a limited appreciation on the limits of the council's powers in some of these areas.

- 4.3** Most of the groups noted a desire for the council to be run in a prudent and *stable* fashion. The well-publicised problems of the Western Isles Council were noted more than once.

Aberdeenshire Council is perceived to be run in a prudent manner.

- 4.4** Perceptions of the council being *accessible* were often positive:
“Local offices are fantastic”.

There were only very rare instances of service failures or problems in accessing the council, which were cited in the focus groups.

- 4.5** The exception to this was a perception (not necessarily widespread) that co-ordination between different parts of the council could be better.

- 4.6** In relation to being *focused on the different needs of its communities*, there were a number of dimensions:
- being focused on the particular problems of rural areas
 - having a vision for the development of towns and villages.

There are some positive signs:

“Having a town co-ordinator for Peterhead is great”.

Despite this, there is some perception that the council is not fully translating its understanding of these needs into actions. Such a view was most common in the far north and far south of the council area.

- 4.7** On the positive side, the council appears to be generally regarded as *fair* and *trustworthy*. This does not mean that residents agree with every council decision but, rather, there is an acceptance that such decisions are made in good faith.

- 4.8** In general, there is a perception that the council is *willing to listen*. Some examples cited concerned the reversal of decisions relating to parking regimes and public toilets. More negatively, there is some feeling that consultation about such policy decisions should be made at an earlier stage: *“before the decision is made”*.
- 4.9** There is a strong tradition of political *independence* in the north east of Scotland. There is some apparent concern about the “party politicisation” of the council. Some residents are resistant to the thought of their local councillor representing a party line rather than their local community.
- 4.10** In one sense, the notion of being *visibly engaged with local communities* builds on the desire, noted above, for a “listening council”. However, it is more than this. It reflects a desire for much more active engagement by the council, and individual councillors, within local communities, so that the council plays a more active role in the development of the economic and social fabric of communities. This feeling is also reflective of the perception noted in Section 2 that the council’s powers are wider than they are.
- 4.11** A desire for the council to adopt an *advocacy* role is a further key element. There is a prevalent view that the council should do more to argue for resources for Aberdeenshire (for example, in relation to major infrastructure investments).
- 4.12** The above comments provide a sense of the qualitative focus group discussions. However, these perceptions will be subject to quantitative analysis through the annual resident survey.

5.0 Image

- 5.1** To provide further insight into underlying perceptions of the council, participants were asked the following question:

“What would Aberdeenshire Council be if it were:

- a supermarket

- an animal?”

This is a projective technique which enables participants to communicate their views in an oblique, indirect manner, thus avoiding any potential embarrassment or conformance to norms.

- 5.2** Often, the council was perceived as having much in common with Somerfield:

“Trying to be the best, but on a smaller scale”

“They offer choice but not as much as the very best”

“They do an alright job with the money they have got”.

On occasion, the council is seen as a no frills supermarket:

“Kwiksave – everything done to minimum standard; they do the bare minimum and you pay for your own bags”.

Interestingly, pupils were likely to rate their school as more upmarket than the council: Tesco and Safeway were the common examples:

“The teachers are good and they really try hard”.

Some responses to this question also suggested a sense of disassociation from the council, following local government re-organisation.

“I preferred it when we had our own corner shop”.

5.3 The animal associations cited by residents suggest an underlying perception of a cumbersome bureaucracy:

“A giant tortoise – slow moving”.

“An ox – gets the job done, but clumsily and slowly – the democratic things slows everything down – nit picking at every little thing”.

The view that the council is trying to improve is again apparent, however:

“A donkey trying to be a horse”.

6.0 Complaint handling

6.1 Relatively few participants in the focus groups had experience of making complaints to the council. Amongst those residents who had such experiences, there were mixed feelings.

In general, specific staff were seen as helpful and most people felt that the handling of their complaints were generally good.

6.2 However, a number of concerns about complaints handling did emerge:

- Concerns over the speed at which complaints were dealt with.
- Having to go “higher up” to get a result.
- Disagreements with actual outcomes of complaints.
- A belief that “you should not have to complain” to get action.

Some examples of a lack of response from individual councillors were noted.

7.0 Social responsibility

7.1 In relation to the council acting with a sense of social responsibility, four specific themes were identifiable:

- environmental policies
- consultation
- plain language
- encouragement of personal responsibility.

- 7.2** The public's own environmental awareness is often relatively superficial. For example, environmentally sustainable behaviour is often seen as being synonymous with "recycling". The ideas of "re-place" and "re-use" were not considered.

Paradoxically, organisations who have historically been seen as damaging to the environment (e.g. oil companies) are commonly viewed as positive examples of environmentally responsive businesses. This is largely due to these organisations proactively and aggressively promoting an environmental positioning, and a formal environmental policy.

- 7.3** Real, timely and sustained consultation is seen as a further aspect of social responsibility. As noted earlier, there remains some scepticism as to the genuineness of the council's consultation efforts.
- 7.4** Accessibility is also important and the use of plain language is seen as one important underlying aspect of such accessibility.
- 7.5** There is a widespread recognition that the resolution of many to the problems which beset communities (crime, vandalism, graffiti, litter etc.) does not lie with the council alone, but requires a greater sense of personal responsibility from ordinary people. A "socially responsible" council is seen as one which tries to find ways of encouraging such personal responsibility, in partnership with local communities.

8.0 Web usage

- 8.1** There were marked differences between the schools and adult groups.

Almost all of the school pupils were web literate and were used to routinely accessing information on the web. However, the opposite was true of the adult groups where even occasional web usage was the exception rather than the norm.

- 8.2** Amongst adults, there is some support for online access to council services although this is seen as an additional choice rather than a replacement for existing means of contact. There is little practical conception of how council services could be delivered online, which implies a need for the promotion of examples of how such online delivery could work.
- 8.3** Amongst younger people, the actual quality, user friendliness and "style" of the site are seen as key determinants of usage. There is even greater vagueness amongst young people as to how online delivery would work, reflecting their lack of experience of council services.
- 8.4** A particular, and specific, point noted in one of the schools' focus groups was criticism of the "online scholar" learning package. This was seen as expensive and offering limited educational value, when compared with traditional teaching methods.

9.0 Wider role

9.1 Given that councils in Scotland will shortly have a power of “general well being” respondents were asked the following question:

“What functions could Aberdeenshire Council perform, which it does not currently, to improve the lives of Aberdeenshire people?”

9.2 In general, the themes which emerged from this discussion were, at least partly, within the council’s existing remit:

- Improving the physical environment of towns and villages.
- Specifically, addressing the problem of empty shops.
- Establishing things for young people to do.
- Enhancing bus services, particularly in rural areas.
- Encouraging a greater sense of community spirit through community social events.

9.3 Amongst the other issues noted in this section of the discussion were:

- The idea of the council adopting online voting.
- The concept of a “discount card” for young people.

The latter concept is discussed more fully in the next section.

10.0 Specific issues from pupils’ consultation

10.1 The views of pupils consulted have contributed to the preceding overview. However, there are four particular issues raised by pupils which are worthy of further, brief comment:

- schools
- “places to hang out”
- buses
- the discount card concept.

10.2 There is a recognition amongst school pupils that budgets are limited and that this is not necessarily the “fault” of the council. However, they do believe that there are occasions where money could be better spent and they do have a sense of frustration, in some cases, about what they see as the deteriorating physical fabric of their schools.

10.3 The problem perceived by young people is a lack of places for 13-16 years olds to “hang out”. Their preference is for somewhere to “chill” which is cheap, and also has good facilities (pool tables etc.). Previous attempts at such ventures appear to have failed due to problems in execution rather than principle. There is strong support for a widely available “youth café” in larger towns which would have reasonably extended opening hours.

10.4 Young people are heavy bus users, and they are particularly scathing about the quality of services currently. Their problems are widespread and include:

- expense
- infrequency
- lack of late night buses
- the poor state of buses
- perceived negative attitudes of bus drivers.

10.5 In part related to the above, an idea emerged in a number of the young person's groups was that of a "young person's discount card". Sixteen and seventeen year olds often see themselves as students, but they find it unfair that they have to pay full fare on buses whereas those who are younger, and those who are older (students), receive discounts.

This led to the discussion of the concept of a "young person's discount card". This would have, as its central benefit, bus discounts. However, it could also feature additional benefits which could be negotiated with local shops.

Clearly, this idea is no more than an initial concept, and no consideration has been given to its costing. However, given the strength of feeling that young people have in its support it should, at least, be given full consideration.

11.0 Conclusions from the residents focus groups

11.1 There is variable awareness of the services for which the council is responsible. In particular, many residents believe its powers to be more extensive than they are in reality.

11.2 The expectation which Aberdeenshire residents have of a "good" local authority can be summed up in the following "scorecard":

- efficient
- delivering quality outputs ("gets the job done")
- accessible
- coordinated
- focused on the different needs of its communities
- fair
- trustworthy
- willing to listen
- independent
- visibly engaged with local communities
- advocacy.

11.3 There are generally positive views of the council in relation to the following aspects of the "scorecard":

- stability
- accessibility

- fair
- trustworthy.

There are mixed views in relation to the following aspects:

- coordination of service delivery
- delivering quality outputs
- being focused on the different needs of its communities
- willingness to listen
- independence.

There are generally negative perceptions with regard to:

- efficiency
- being visibly engaged in local communities
- adopting an advocacy role for Aberdeenshire.

- 11.4** Underlying perceptions of the council suggest a perception that it is committed to improvement but, in common with other local authorities, is seen as slow and cumbersome.
- 11.5** Modest concerns are evident with regards to the speed of complaint handling. Most dissatisfaction arises from the outcome of the complaints process rather than its handling.
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 - Specifically, addressing the problem of empty shops.
 - Establishing things for young people to do.
 - Enhancing bus services, particularly in rural areas.
 - Encouraging a greater sense of community spirit through community social events.

11.9 Amongst the issues of specific concern, or interest, to S5/S6 pupils are the following:

- schools
- “places to hang out”
- buses
- the discount card concept.

11.10 The issues raised in the focus groups in May 2002 were further investigated in the council’s annual residents survey, fieldwork for which took place in summer 2002. The results are described in the following section.

PART 2
Quantitative Survey

1.0 Executive summary of the quantitative survey

- 1.1** Aberdeenshire Council undertook its first comprehensive survey in the period since local government reorganisation, in the year 2000. This involved a combination of focus groups (described in part 1), telephone interviews and a substantial postal survey.

In 2002, it was decided to repeat the comprehensive residents consultation process, updating the survey questionnaire and repeating selected questions from 2000 and 2001 where appropriate.

This document summarises the result of the quantitative element of this process.

- 1.2** The issues investigated by the survey included the following:

- overall satisfaction
- contacting the council
- customer service
- dealing with complaints
- the communities of Aberdeenshire
- roads and transportation
- satisfaction with key services
- the world wide web
- social responsibility
- council decision making.

- 1.3** As noted above, a key input to the research design was the programme of focus groups undertaken in spring 2002, as described in Part 1 of this report. Other inputs to the survey questionnaire, devised in partnership with the public/employee survey team (PEST) included:

- Selected questions from the 2000 survey, although in some instances the wording of these was updated, and space precluded the asking of certain questions. This means that it is not always possible to compare results from 2000 to 2002.
- Utilisation of the benchmarking questions issued by COSLA, where appropriate.
- Inputs from various services within the council, seeking to gauge public opinion on specific issues.

The first element of field work was a programme of 300 telephone interviews, which was stratified to be representative of each of the six area management committee areas within Aberdeenshire. A total of 300 interviews were conducted in this way.

In addition, a total of 16,109 postal invitations were issued, from which 3,330 responses were received.

The key conclusions emerging from this strand of the 2002 research are summarised below for completeness.

- 1.4** The evidence is that there have been little changes in net satisfaction ratings for Aberdeenshire Council overall, over the past few years. The council's efforts at service improvement have, most likely, been accompanied by increasing demands on the part of consumers, against a background of some disaffection with public services generally.

In particular, considerable scepticism is evident as to whether the council makes effective use of the money available to it.

However, the evidence is that this is a perception held of local authorities generally and, indeed, Aberdeenshire residents are more likely to believe their council to be better than other authorities, than to believe it to be worse.

- 1.5** In general, most people find it easy to contact the council and only a small minority express dissatisfaction with their most recent contact.

Good ratings are received for a range of contact management attributes, although much poorer perceptions are evident with regard to how well customers are kept updated.

The most popular options for improving contact are the publication of direct line telephone numbers and extended weekday telephone availability.

Most of the sources of information used by residents are not in the council's control. There is, however, a demand for more direct communication from the council, including over the internet.

- 1.6** The council attains positive service ratings for issues such as courtesy and plain language. Many customers do not believe, however, that clear explanations are often given for decisions which are made.

- 1.7** There is a significant level of dissatisfaction with the council's complaint handling, although this is closely correlated to the actual outcomes of complaints.

- 1.8** Although the council is seen as now doing a reasonable job in keeping towns and villages clean and tidy, residents still believe that more should be done to improve these communities, and to enhance their overall vibrancy and appeal to residents.

In particular, there is a very strong view that facilities for young people in Aberdeenshire's communities are poor.

- 1.9** Particular concerns are evident with respect to the frequency, cost and convenience of public transport within Aberdeenshire.

- 1.10** Positive service ratings overall are evident with respect to schools and libraries.

Lukewarm satisfaction ratings are evident overall with respect to council housing services, sports and leisure facilities, social work and council-run parks and open spaces. There is, however, compelling evidence that satisfaction ratings are skewed downwards by the broad perceptions of non-service users, and that service users are actually much more positive about their experiences.

There are strongly negative perceptions of planning and building control. We consider these perceptions to be related to policy, rather than service delivery issues.

- 1.11** The council retains reasonable satisfaction ratings in relation to refuse collection, street lighting and street cleansing, which are broadly similar to results from 2000.

Ratings for road maintenance (not necessarily council-maintained roads) and, more particularly, winter gritting/snow clearing have declined significantly, however. A significant number of people believe performance to have worsened in these two areas.

- 1.12** More positively, libraries and schools are believed to be improving.

- 1.13** Usage of the web is becoming more apparent amongst Aberdeenshire residents, particularly young people. There is a good level of potential demand for accessing council services online.

- 1.14** Whilst the council is believed to behave in an environmentally friendly way, there remains a belief that it could do more to help others.

There appears to be a positive willingness to face up to individual responsibilities in terms of waste management. However, the challenge of encouraging less use of private motor cars is a much greater one.

- 1.15** Aberdeenshire residents are more likely than the norm to know whom their local councillor is. However, there is scepticism as to whether the council listens genuinely to the views of local communities, and as to whether individuals can have a real influence.

- 1.16** Many people believe that the council should do more to communicate the reasons for its decisions to the wider public.

2.0 Background, objectives and methodology

2.1 Background

- 2.1.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook its first comprehensive residents survey, in the period since local government reorganisation, in the 2000. This involved a combination of focus groups, telephone interviews and a postal survey.
- 2.1.2 In 2001, no comprehensive survey of residents views was undertaken. Rather, the council focused on contact management issues within specific areas and undertook a survey of opinions of the business community.
- 2.1.3 In 2002, it was decided to repeat the comprehensive residents consultation process, updating the survey questionnaire and repeating selected questions from 2000 and 2001 where appropriate.
- 2.1.4 This section of the report summarises the result of the quantitative element of this process. That is, the telephone interviews and postal survey which were conducted.

2.2 Objectives

- 2.2.1 The issues investigated by the survey included the following:
- overall satisfaction
 - contacting the council
 - customer service
 - dealing with complaints
 - the communities of Aberdeenshire
 - roads and transportation
 - satisfaction with key services
 - the world wide web
 - social responsibility
 - council decision making.
- 2.2.2 The purpose of the survey is not to provide information of an academic nature, but to facilitate better decision making within the organisation. For this reason, the survey questionnaire was developed in close partnership with the public and employee survey team (PEST). In addition, the results of the survey will be widely disseminated throughout the organisation.
- 2.2.3 The focus is one of continuous improvement. The survey is designed to identify areas of priority for residents, and to gauge their perception on the council's current performance in these areas, and how it might improve.

It is important to recognise that the results are based on perceptions, rather than empirical evidence of actual service performance. It is recognised that these perceptions are formed both from experience of the actual service, and also from wider communications and word of mouth. Satisfaction with particular aspects of council service are also influenced by changing expectations of service delivery (both in the public and private sectors) in addition to the effectiveness and efficiency of actual service delivery.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 As noted above, a key input to the research design was the programme of focus groups undertaken in spring 2002, as detailed in Part 1 of this report. Other inputs to the survey questionnaire, devised in partnership with PEST, included:

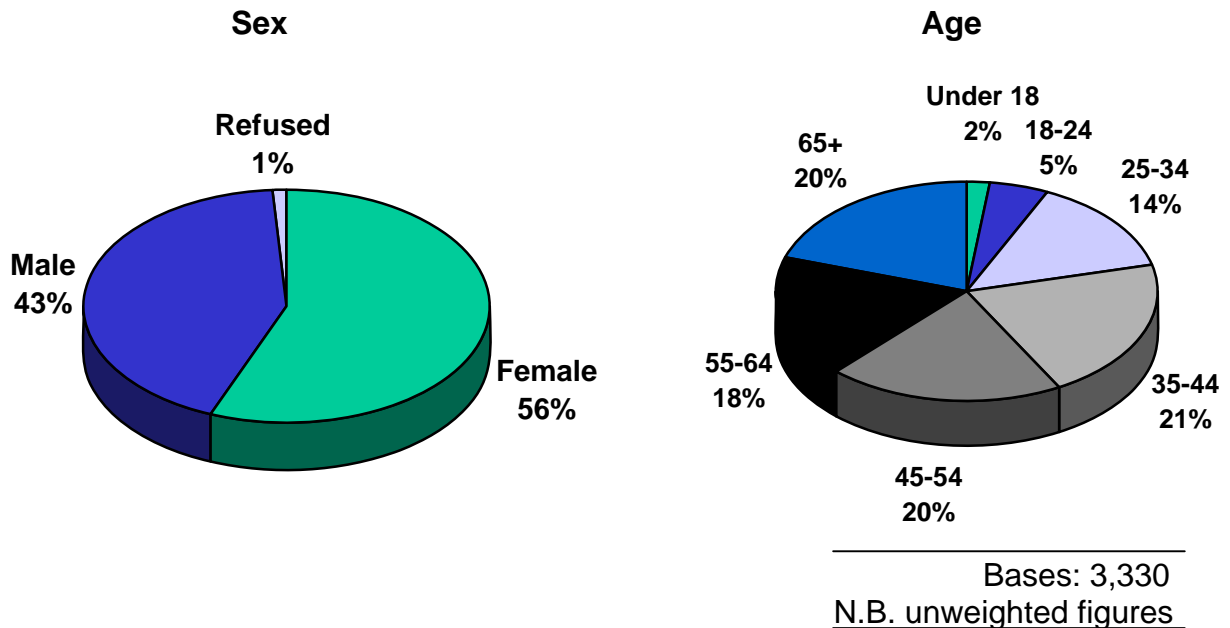
- Selected questions from the 2000 survey, although in some instances the wording of these was updated, and space precluded the asking of certain questions, meaning that it is not always possible to compare results from 2000 to 2002.
- Utilisation of the benchmarking questions issued by COSLA, where appropriate.
- Inputs from various services within the council, seeking to gauge public opinion on specific issues.

2.3.2 The first element of fieldwork was a programme of 300 telephone interviews, which was stratified to be representative of each of the six area management committee areas within Aberdeenshire. A total of 300 interviews were conducted in this way.

In addition, an initial 10,000 postal invitations were issued, from which 1,772 responses were received. Investigation of these responses established that the initial database utilised had been disproportionately weighted towards certain parts of the council area. For this reason, a top up mailing of 6,109 was issued in late July, from which a further 1,558 responses were received.

2.3.3 The profile of respondents by sex and age is detailed in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Profile of Respondents – Sex and Age

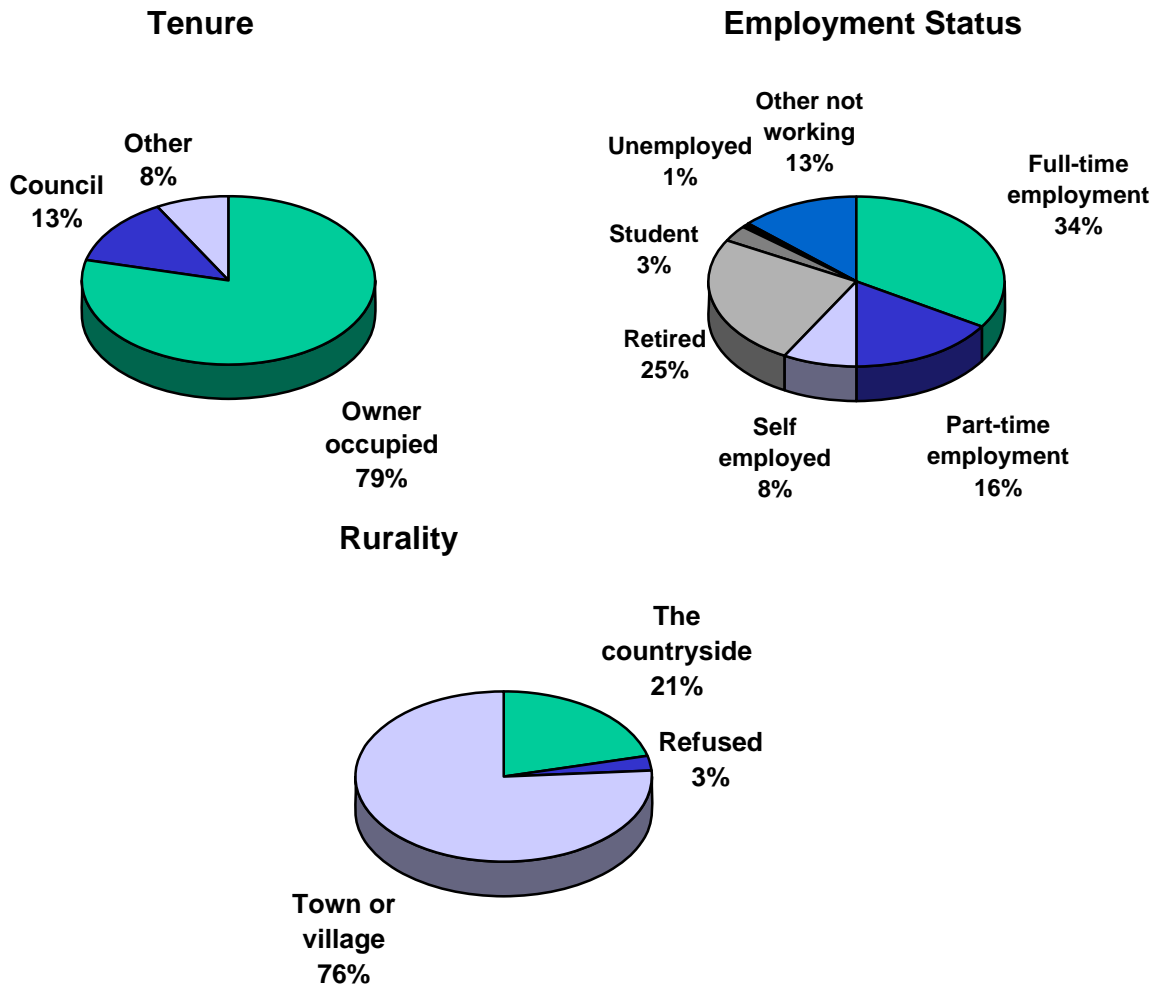


In relation to gender, females were somewhat more likely than males to respond to the postal survey. However, the resultant mix of males to females is almost exactly that which was achieved in the 2000 survey.

In relation to age, the profile of respondents is again very similar to that achieved in the 2000 survey. Younger age groups are very slightly under represented and the 65+ age group is slightly over represented. We do not believe that these issues represent any significant skew in relation to the overall results, and significant numbers of respondents are available in each category to allow for robust analysis of that particular age group's perceptions.

2.3.4 Figure 2.2 further comments on the profile of respondents by tenure, rurality and employment status.

Figure 2.2: Profile of Respondents – Tenure, Rurality and Employment Status



Bases: 3,330
N.B. unweighted figures

In relation to tenure, the results are somewhat skewed towards owner occupiers, with 79% of respondents falling into this category against approximately 68% of the Aberdeenshire housing stock profile. Those living in council houses were slightly under represented, although again there is a significant number of respondents to allow for analysis of the views of this particular category (447 respondents). Likewise, the “other” category which includes those living in housing association properties or private rented properties is under represented (8% against 14% of the stock profile). Once again, however, the achieved sample profile is very consistent with responses to the 2000 survey.

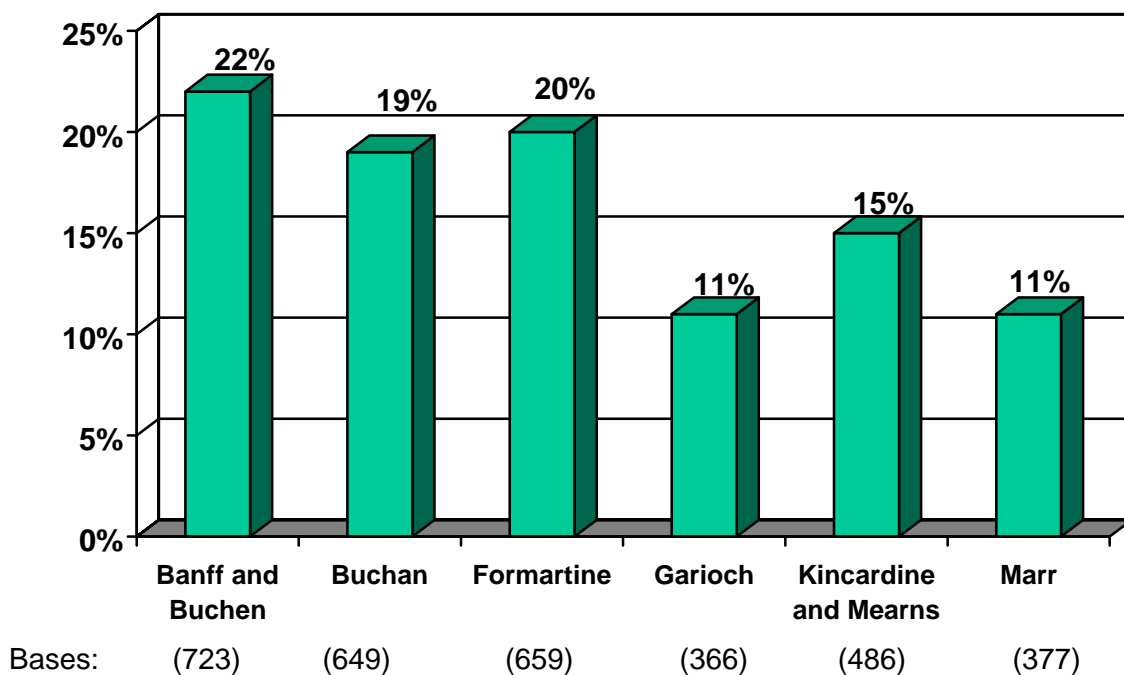
The same is true of rurality, where 76% said that they lived in a town or village, which compares to 75% of respondents to the 2000 survey.

In relation to employment status this pattern is again evident, with the profile detailed in Figure 2.2 (page 19) above being almost identical to that achieved in the 2000 survey.

2.3.5 We can conclude therefore that the samples achieved in 2000 and 2002 are broadly comparable in relation to the categories of gender, age, tenure, rurality and employment status.

2.3.6 The same cannot be said of location for the reasons described above in relation to the requirement for a top up survey. The actual profile of respondents by area is detailed in Figure 2.3 below:

Figure 2.3: Profile of Respondents by Area



Bases as noted; 70 refusals;
N.B. unweighted figures

Once again, the sample sizes in each area are sufficiently robust to allow for an analysis of the views of people living within that area. However, at an overall level, certain areas are under represented, and other areas are over represented, in relation to their share of the Aberdeenshire population. In the main body of analysis within the report, results have been weighted to ensure representativeness by area. For example, as there are fewer respondents from Garioch on an unweighted basis, these are weighted to ensure that the responses from Garioch represent its share of the total population.

2.3.7 In addition, the mix of telephone and postal interviews was slightly different between 2000 and 2002. In 2000, of the total sample size of 2,726, 400 interviews were conducted by telephone. In 2002, of the total sample size of 2,330, 300 interviews were conducted by telephone. Review of the initial unweighted data identified significant differences in perception amongst those interviewed by telephone, and those providing a postal response. This is a recognised phenomenon in market research and is considered to reflect a tendency to avoid forthright or “extreme” points of view when communicating these views to a person, either face to face or by telephone. Conversely, postal respondents are more likely to be forthright in their views.

To maximise comparability with the 2000 survey, further weighting criteria have therefore been applied to reflect the mix of postal and telephone interviews.

The application of these weightings ensures comparability between the 2000 and 2002 surveys in relation to location and survey methodology.

2.3.8 The survey questionnaire utilised is set out in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 incorporates detailed data tables on both a weighted and unweighted basis. These appendices have been supplied separately to the council in electronic form and are held in the chief executive’s office at Woodhill House.

3.0 Overall satisfaction

3.1 There are various strands of data which go to the issues of overall customer satisfaction, which are described below.

By way of context, we would note that the historical trend in satisfaction with Scottish local authorities is downward. Net satisfaction was:

- 42% in 1995
- 31% in 1998
- 18% in 1999

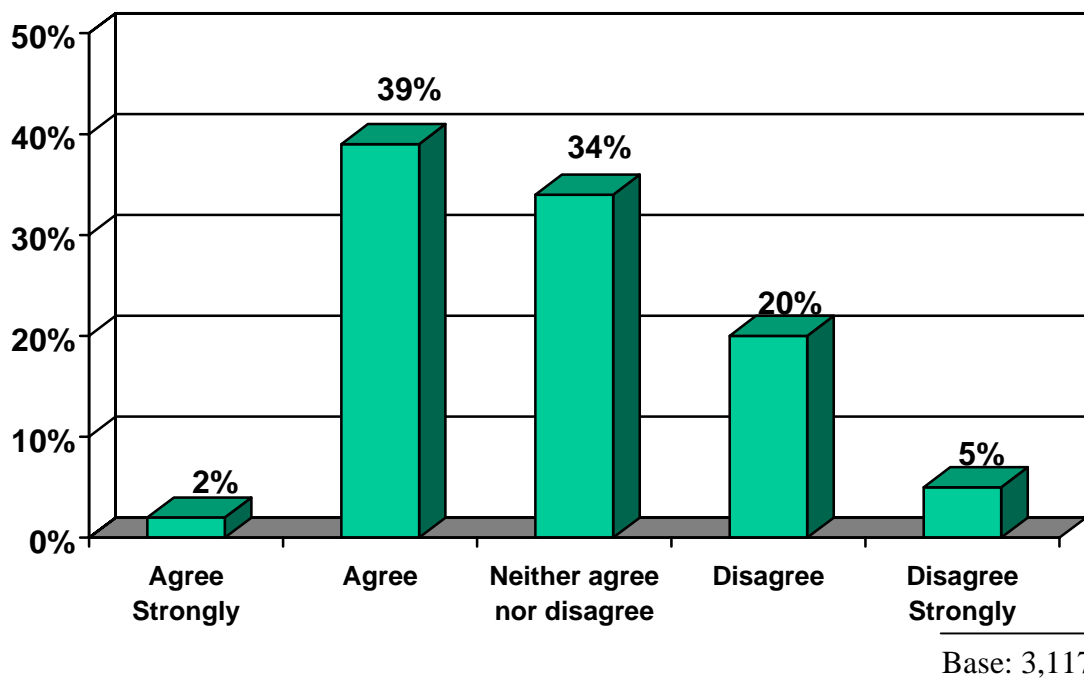
Source: *The Community Portal, Scottish Council Foundation, 2000*

3.2 In 2000, in response to the question: “Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with Aberdeenshire Council as a provider of local services?”a net satisfaction rating of 16% was achieved.

The wording of this question was changed in 2002, to bring the council into line with the COSLA benchmarking questions. An agree/disagree statement was asked (again on a 5 point scale) relating to the question: “I am satisfied with Aberdeenshire Council as a provider of local services.”

The results of this are detailed in Figure 3.1 below:

Figure 3.1: Overall Satisfaction



A net agreement of 16% was recorded. Whilst the questions are slightly different, the indicative information suggests little or no change in satisfaction with Aberdeenshire Council. If expectations have indeed risen, and overall satisfaction levels with councils continue to decline, this

would be a positive performance in relative terms. Clearly, the reverse is also true.

- 3.3** To date, only one council has submitted benchmark information to COSLA (this was in May 2000) relating to this question. A net agreement rating of 6% was recorded, which is much poorer than Aberdeenshire council's performance.
- 3.4** Arguably, the most comprehensive and consistent data set for recording such top level ratings is the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), which provides comparison data across councils, with figures currently available for 2000.

Responses to the agree/disagree question: *"My council provides high quality services"* have been provided to the council under separate cover.

The SHS shows that Aberdeenshire's net satisfaction rating is 17% (consistent with the data above) which puts it at 16th out of 32 councils.

The weighted total for all councils was 9% net agreement, a figure which the Aberdeenshire Council outperforms.

- 3.5** The SHS is funded through to 2002, and a publication of updated results is likely in early 2003. This data set (whilst it does not allow the detailed issues of the council's own survey to be investigated) provides comprehensive baseline and benchmark information on overall satisfaction. Its usage needs to be built into the council's wider research programme.
- 3.6** In the council's own survey, respondents were presented with a series of additional agree/disagree statements of an overall nature. These were:
- "Aberdeenshire Council gives residents good value for money".
 - "The council does the best it can to make effective use of the money available to it".
 - "I am satisfied with the way the council is running Aberdeenshire".
 - "Aberdeenshire Council does a good job encouraging others (such as Scottish Executive, UK Government and private companies) to invest in Aberdeenshire".

These results are somewhat disappointing (see Figure 3.2 over) although as noted below they are consistent with the limited benchmark information available from COSLA on other councils.

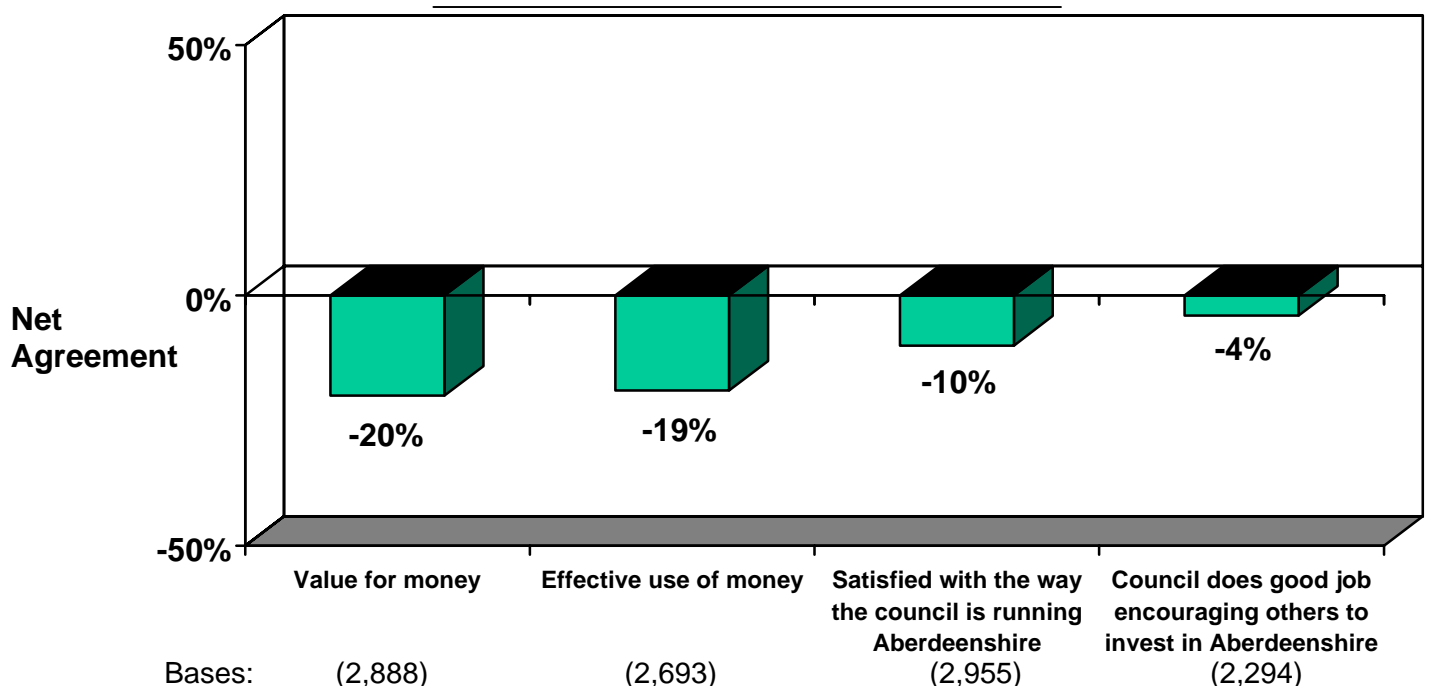
For example, 22% agree that the council gives residents good value for money against the 42% who disagree (i.e. a net disagreement of 20%). There are two recent instances where other councils asked this question, and provided the data to COSLA. In these instances, net disagreement ratings of 9% and 10% are recorded.

A scepticism about whether the council is really delivering value for money is reflected in the majority view that it does not do the best it can to make effective use of the money available to it (only 24% believe that it does against 43% who disagree). In reality, it is important to recognise the basis of these perceptions, in that few residents will have truly robust information on whether the council is indeed delivering its services in the most cost effective manner. Their views are likely to be informed by a combination of factors such as actual service experience, communications from the council and more general media coverage. This question does, therefore, give rise to communications challenges for the council, as well as the ongoing need to continue to achieve best value.

There is slight disagreement with the COSLA benchmarking statement that *“I am satisfied with the way the council is running Aberdeenshire”* (26% agree against 36% who disagree). Regrettably, no recent information from other councils has been posted on the COSLA website in relation to this question. It’s interesting to note, however, the differences in response to the question about the council as a provider of local services (responses are generally positive in relation to the latter). This implies that, where dissatisfaction is evident it is more related to wider perceptions of the council rather than the specific delivery of local services. Other strands of evidence noted elsewhere in this report, will tend to support this view.

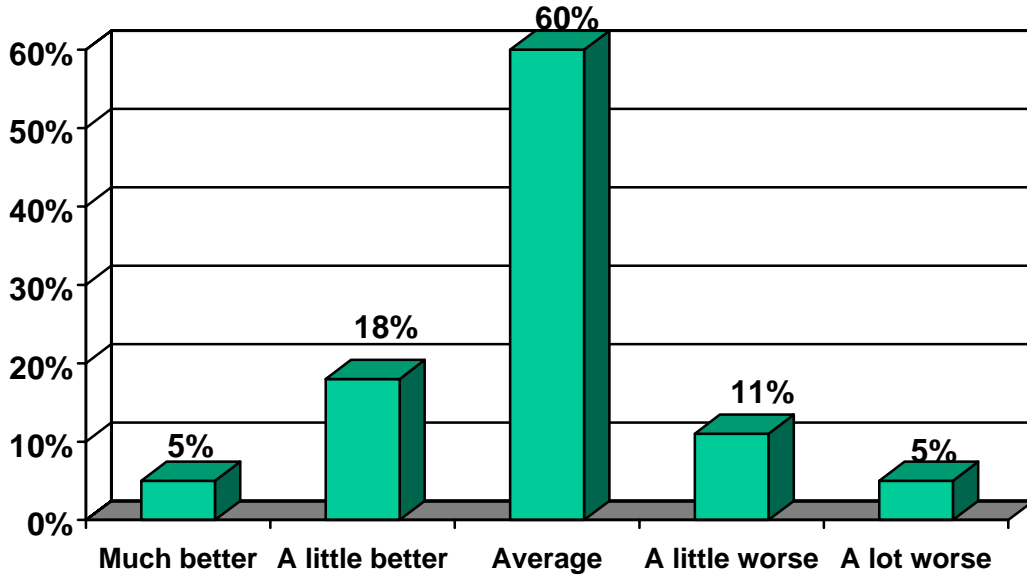
There are mixed views as to whether the council does a good enough job in encouraging others to invest in Aberdeenshire. This was a particular concern of the focus groups, and indeed the 2001 business survey, with individuals feeling that the council had a leadership responsibility in “batting” for Aberdeenshire. As might be expected, there was a significant “don’t know” response to this question. However, amongst those who did respond, 28% believe that the council did a good job and 32% disagreed.

Figure 3.2: Overall Views – Key Issues



3.7 A specific strand of overall satisfaction data is residents' views on how Aberdeenshire compares to other councils. These results are set out in Figure 3.3, and are positive:

Figure 3.3: Overall Views – Comparisons to Other Councils



Base: 2,402

There is a marked disparity of opinion by area, with respondents in Banff/ Buchan and Buchan perceiving Aberdeenshire Council to be worse than other councils (net negative ratings of 9% and 8% respectively).

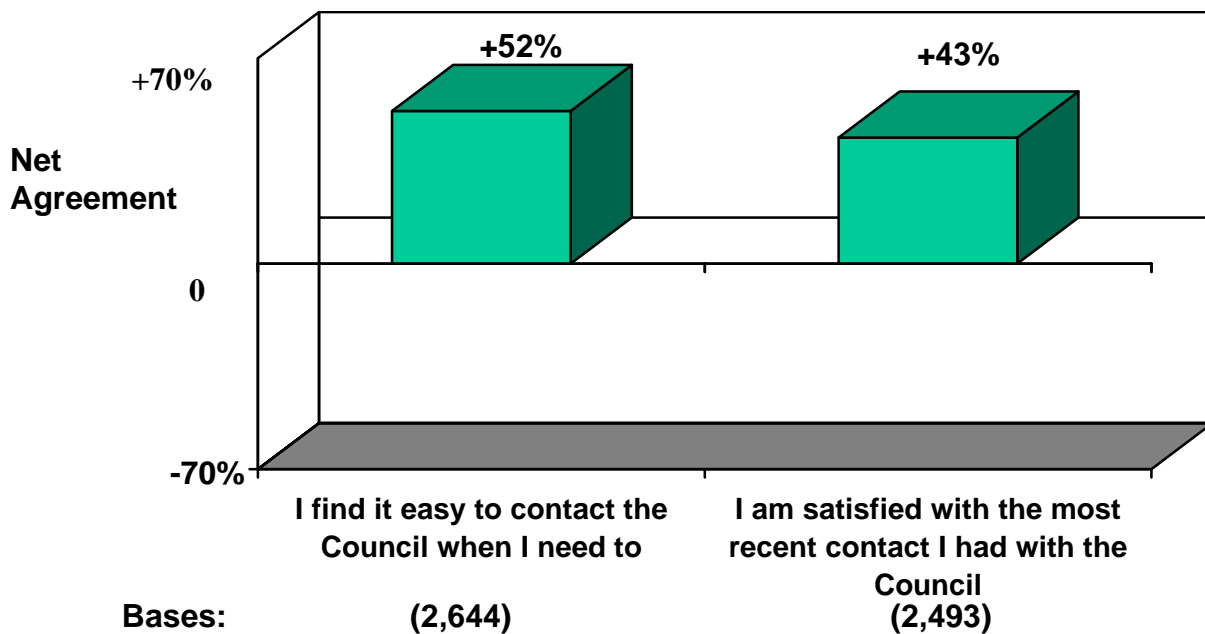
4.0 Contacting the council

4.1 The key themes addressed under this heading included:

- ease of contact
- satisfaction with various aspects of contact
- access to council information.

4.2 Responses in relation to two core questions about ease of contact are detailed in Figure 4.1 below:

Figure 4.1: Contacting the Council



These are generally positive ratings. For example 65% of the total sample find it easy to contact the council against 13% who disagree with this statement. Interestingly, there is no evidence of difficulties in contacting the council being related to criteria such as gender, age, tenure or employment status. Nor, indeed, is it related to rurality (although 16% of those who live in the countryside disagree that they find it easy to contact the council, compared to 13% of the sample as a whole).

Those in Buchan (19%) are most likely to disagree that it is easy to contact the council when required.

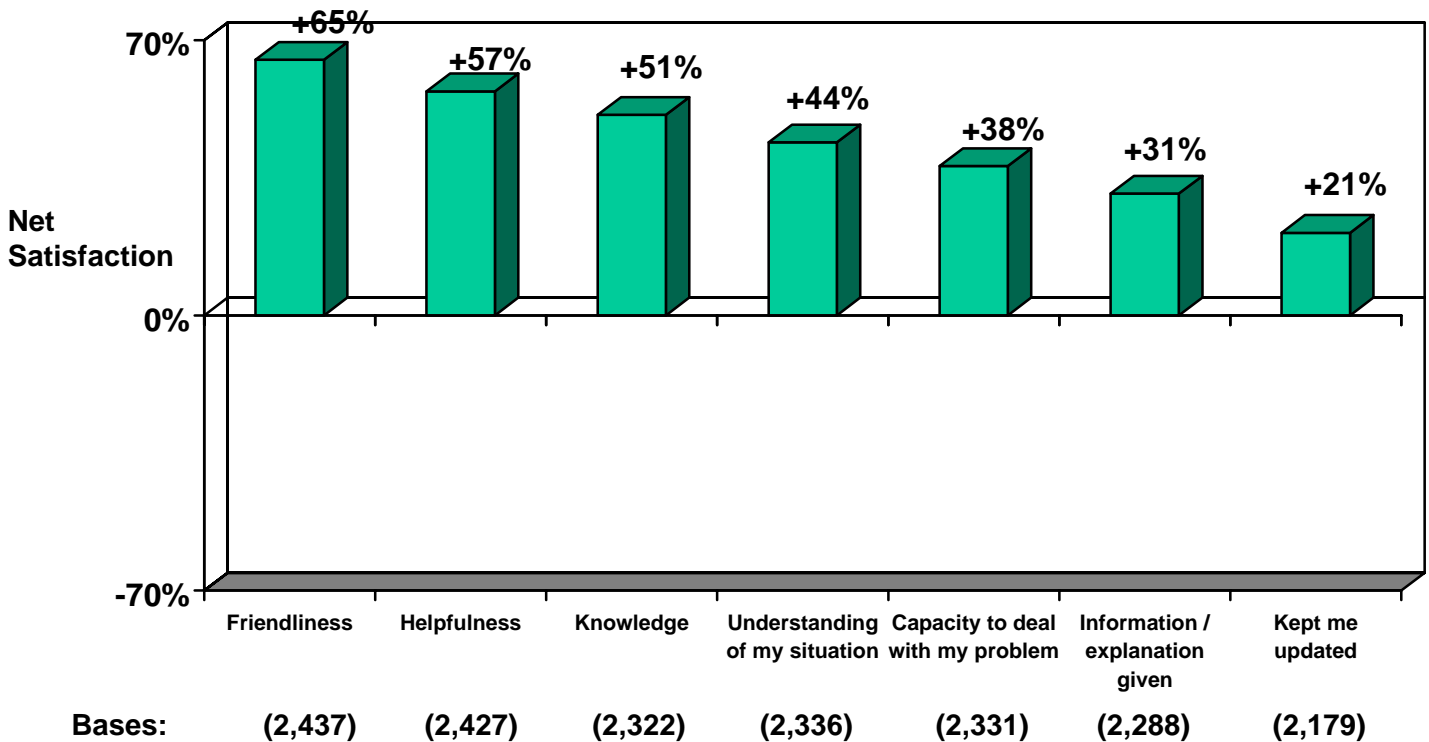
Satisfaction with the most recent contact is broadly positive (60% give a positive rating, compared to 17% who disagree). There is a tendency for younger age groups to be less satisfied with the contact which they most recently had with the council. Whilst 60% of the overall sample were satisfied, for example, only 39% of those in the 19-24 age category were satisfied.

Those in the older age groups (72% of 65-74 year olds and 74% of 75+ year olds) are most likely to be satisfied. Our interpretation is that younger age groups are more demanding of public service providers than the older age groups who grew up in a cultural environment which put the producer rather than the consumer first.

4.3 There is, again, very little benchmarking information available from COSLA on this subject. However, the one council who asked the question about ease of contact received a net dissatisfaction rating of 12%. Clearly, the council's performance compares very favourably with this.

4.4 Figure 4.2 below sets out the net satisfaction ratings for a range of contact attributes. Whilst a similar question was asked in the 2000 survey, it was only asked of those who had had contact with the council in the past 12 months. This routing could not be placed in the 2002 survey for reasons of space and so these results are not directly comparable to the 2000 survey.

Figure 4.2: Satisfaction with Service Delivery



The following observations may be made in relation to Figure 4.2:

- Very positive ratings are received for friendliness of staff with only 7% expressing any form of dissatisfaction. Again, older age groups are somewhat more likely to be satisfied and younger age groups somewhat more likely to be dissatisfied although the differences in relation to this question are relatively marginal.
- A similar pattern emerges in relation to helpfulness, although slightly more respondents expressed dissatisfaction in this area (12%). Interestingly, those living in council houses, are relatively positive about this category, with 79% expressing explicit satisfaction against 69% of the sample as a whole. Again, there is a slight tendency for respondents in Banff/Buchan and Buchan to be more negative.
- Generally positive ratings are received for “knowledge” with only 13% expressing dissatisfaction on this matter.
- A slightly more substantial minority (17%) expressed dissatisfaction with “understanding of my situation”. Again, perceptions vary only marginally across different locations and demographic criteria.
- Slightly more lukewarm ratings are achieved in relation to “capacity to deal with my problem” (58% are satisfied and 20% dissatisfied).
- Results are again more lukewarm in relation to “information/explanation they gave me” with 53% expressing satisfaction and 22% dissatisfaction. As with the other categories in this question, similar views are held across a range of demographic criteria.
- The most significant concern in relation to this question is the significant minority (25%) who expressed dissatisfaction with “the extent to which they kept me updated about what was happening”. This should be set against only 46% who expressed specific satisfaction on this point. This is clearly an area for further investigation and action on the part of the council.

4.5 Respondents were given a range of options by which the council could make it easier for people to have contact with them, and to give their views, and were asked to note which they would find particularly helpful. The results of this are set out in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1: Interest in Other Forms of Contact

Direct line telephone numbers	-	39%
8am-8pm telephone service	-	35%
Weekend opening	-	18%
More local offices	-	22%
Internet	-	21%
Offices open in evenings	-	14%
Councillor surgeries	-	12%

Base: 3,330

Two options received much more support than the others.

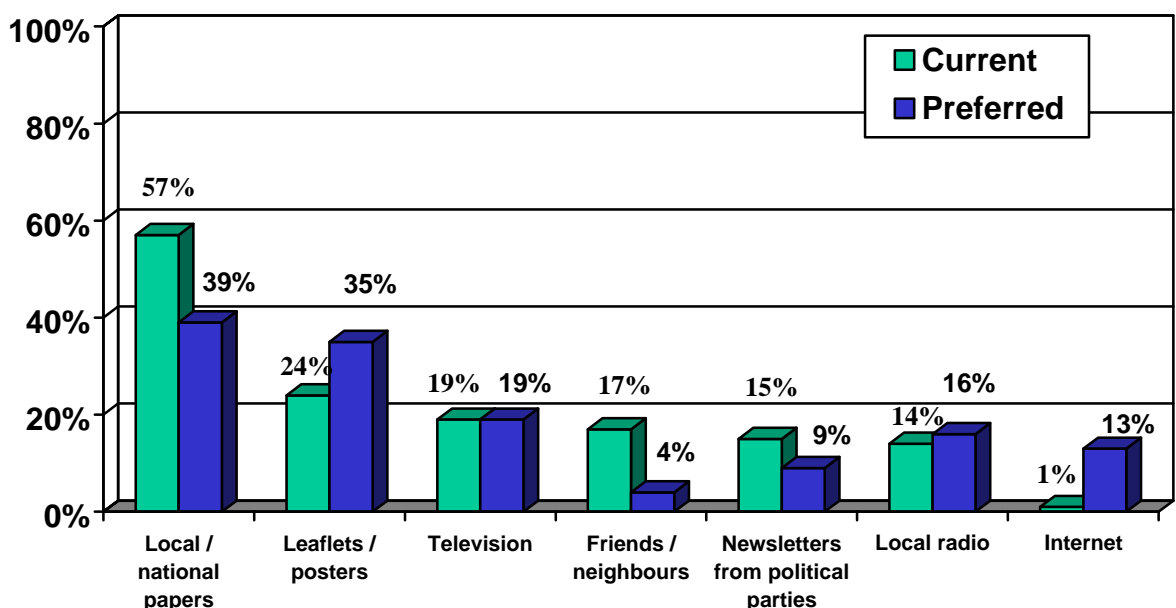
Firstly, there is a great deal of support for the publicising of direct line telephone numbers on specific services. In our view, this illustrates a desire to have issues addressed quickly, with a minimum of fuss, however this is achieved in practice.

The desire for more local offices, weekend opening, offices open in the evenings and more councillors surgeries, whilst they are mentioned by some people, remain minority concerns.

Secondly, the desire amongst 21% of respondents for information on the internet is particularly important for two reasons. As noted later in this report, only 48% of people are users of the internet at home, so the 21% who believe that having council information on the internet would be helpful represents a much greater proportion of those who actually have home access. People in younger age categories are also much more likely to see having information on the internet as being helpful (for example, 34% of those in the 19-24 age group).

4.6 Pursuing the information theme further, respondents were asked how they currently receive information about what the council is doing and how they would like to receive this information in the future. This was from a long list of 24 options, and the full results are detailed in the appendices. Figure 4.3 below identifies the most common themes emerging from this question.

Figure 4.3: Sources of Information



Base: 3,330

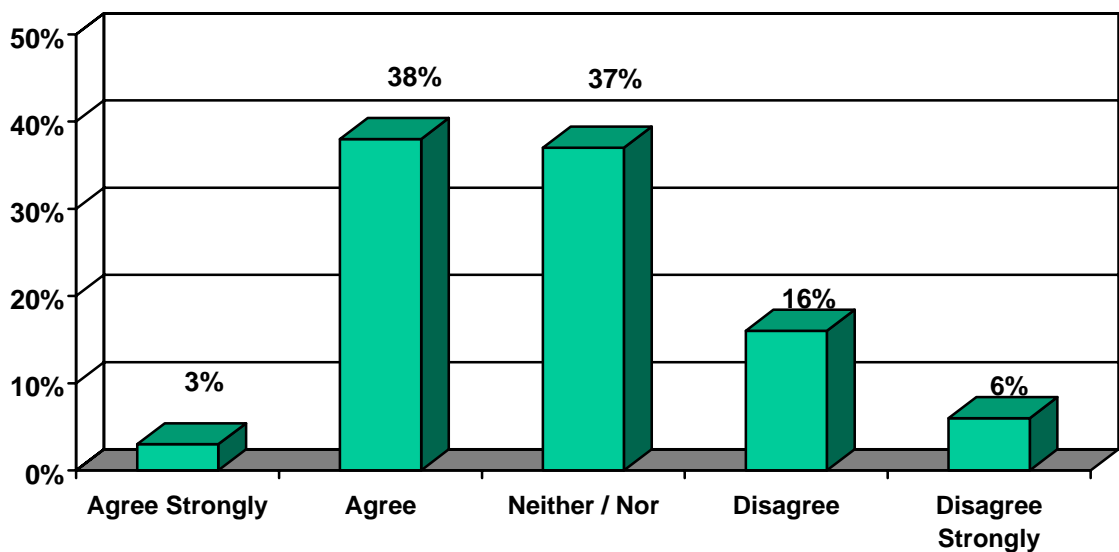
The specific wording of the questions related to “information about what Aberdeenshire Council is doing and the services it provides”. It is then clear that the majority of current sources of information are not within the explicit control of the council: these being, papers, television, word of mouth through friends and neighbours, newsletters from political parties, local radio. This places particular challenges for the council in relation to its wider communications strategy. There is some desire for people to receive information on a more direct basis (for example through leaflets and posters). However, many of the preferred means of communication remain outwith the direct control of the council.

4.7 The marked change amongst those who currently receive information over the internet and those who would like to, suggests this is an area of latent potential. Amongst those who would like to receive information over the internet, the most common groupings are younger people (eg, 20% of those who are 18 or under). However, significant numbers of those in the middle age categories (17% of these aged 45-54) also cite it as a preferred option. The overall results are actually skewed down by there being only 3% of 65-74 year olds who support this option.

4.8 A further point to note in relation to the question on sources of information is the sheer disparity of means by which people both receive information and would prefer to receive it in the future. This implies that any future communications strategy will have to be a multi-channel one and that these channels will sometimes reside within the council’s direct control and sometimes will not.

4.9 The COSLA benchmarking question on satisfaction with information received on council services was asked and the results are stated in Figure 4.4 below:

Figure 4.4: “Overall, I am satisfied with the information I get on council services”



Base: 2,881

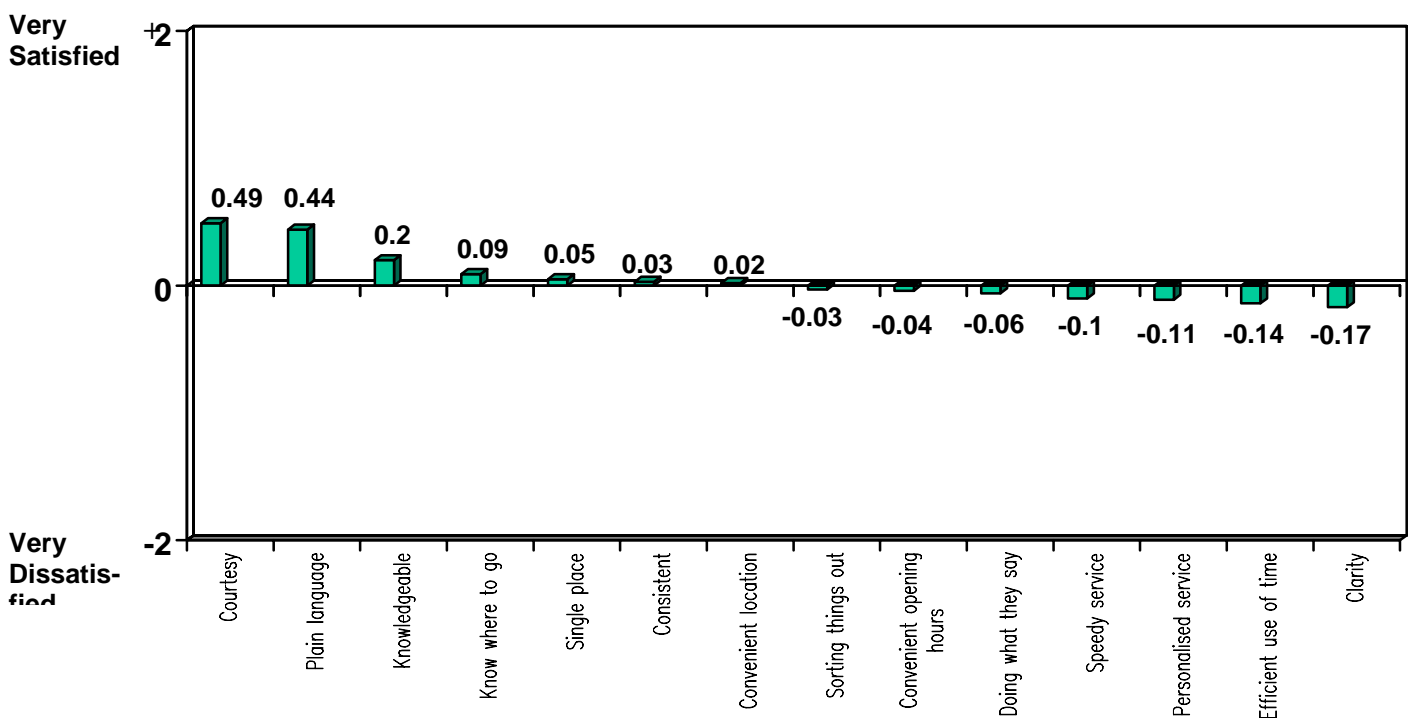
Whilst the balance of these results is positive, the 22% who disagree with the contention and indeed the 37% who express a neutral opinion should give some cause for concern. As implied above, younger age groups are somewhat less likely to be satisfied, as are those in full time paid employment and the self employed. The same is true of people living in Buchan.

Clearly, by addressing the issues alluded to elsewhere in terms of the means of contact (both in relation to ease of contacting individuals within the council and other means of accessing information) the council would be taking steps to address the minority dissatisfaction which does exist in relation to this question.

5.0 Customer service

5.1 A series of customer service attributes were developed for the 2001 contact management survey. These were used in the 2002 survey, to gather views on the service perceived to be provided by Aberdeenshire Council overall. Figure 5.1 sets out the mean ratings achieved for each of these attributes where a five point scale from very good to very poor was utilised. For example, a very good rating receives a score of plus 2, a good rating a score of plus 1, an average rating a zero score and poor rating a score of minus 1 and a very poor rating a score of minus 2.

Figure 5.1: Customer Service Ratings



Overall, a mixed picture emerges whereby:

- the council scores better than average for some attributes
- its ratings are around “average” for a number of other attributes
- it receives worse than average ratings for other aspects.

5.2 The following observations may be made, therefore:

- Very positive ratings are received in relation to courtesy. Again, older people are more likely to be positive than younger people although the differences are more marginal in this instance. The council is also seen as an organisation which communicates in plain language, a view which is fairly universally held.
- It also scores better than average in relation to “being knowledgeable about their subject”.

- 5.3** There are a range of issues where the council's ratings are, generally speaking, around average. These include:
- "Making it easy to know where to go for help and advice".
 - "Providing a range of help and services from a single place".
 - "Being consistent in the information they give you".
 - "Letting you access their services from a convenient location (those living in the countryside are only very slightly likely to be less positive about this issue)".
 - "Sorting things out when they go wrong".
 - "Having opening hours which are convenient to the public (the comments in the previous section on extended opening hours are relevant here)".
 - "Doing what they say they will do".
 - "Providing a speedy service".
 - "Providing a personalised service to you".
- 5.4** The two areas where the council received the poorest ratings in relation to these customer service issues are:
- Making efficient use of their time (32% of the sample believe the council to be poor at this).
 - Clarity, in relation being clear about why they have made a certain decision (36% of people provided a "very poor" or "poor" rating in relation to this question).

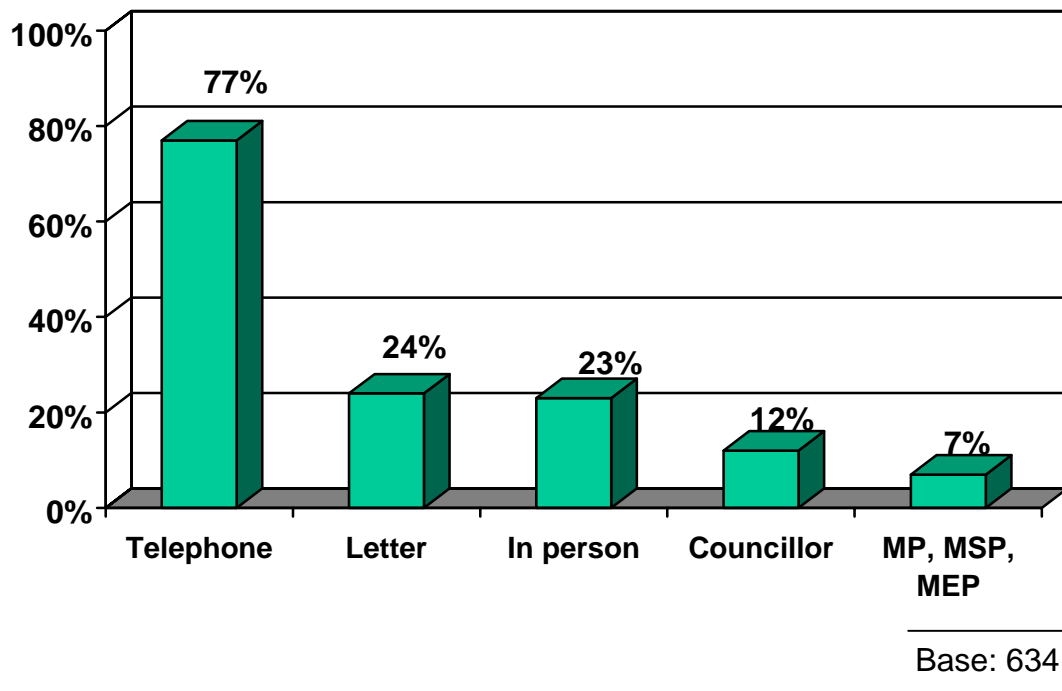
The latter point, in particular, should be a subject for further consideration by the council.

6.0 Dealing with complaints

6.1 19% of the sample (634 people) state that they or a member of their household has complained to the council in the last 24 months. We envisage that this will be somewhat higher than the number of complaints that would be recorded by the council's formal complaints system, which reflects a difference in the definition of what constitutes a "complaint" between the organisation and service users. The grouping most likely to perceive itself to have made such a complaint is those living in council houses (28%).

6.2 Figure 6.1 below demonstrates the means by which the complaint was made (numbers add to more than 100 as multiple responses were allowed):

Figure 6.1: Method of Complaint

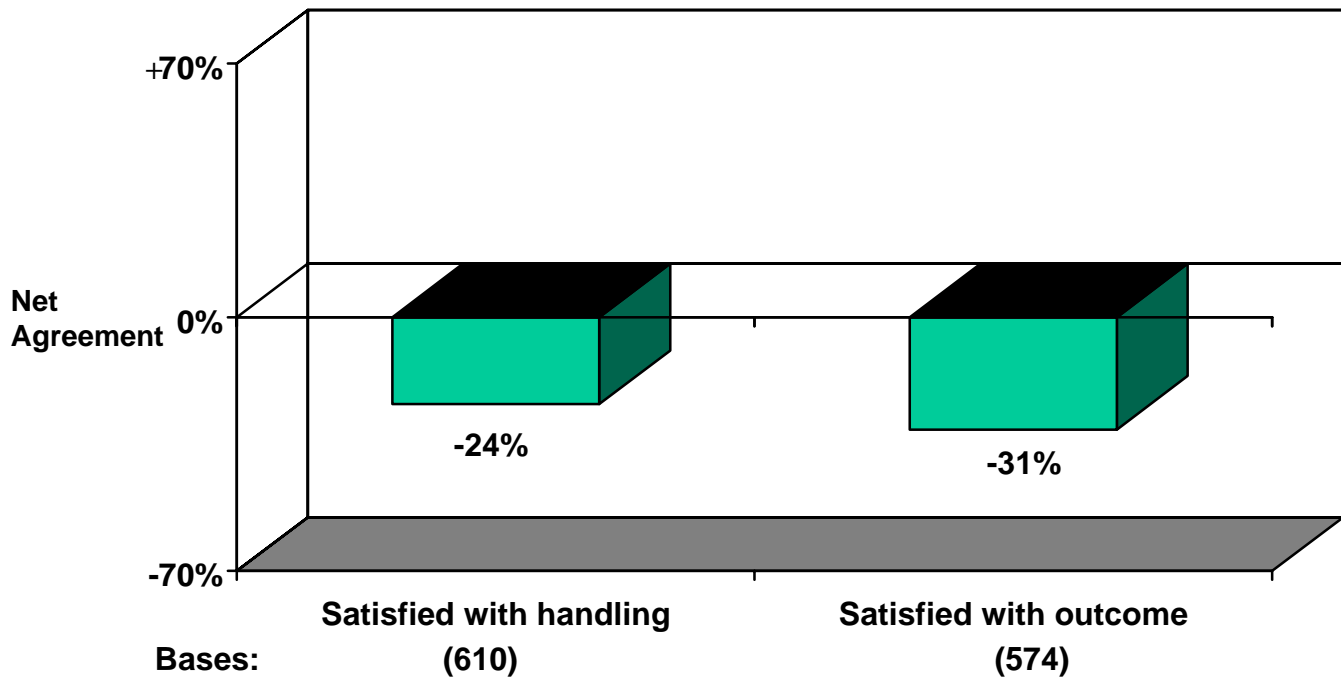


It seems likely that a number of the telephone "complaints" would not have been formally recorded as such.

6.3 Figure 6.2 below sets out net agreements figures in relation to two statements:

- “I was satisfied with the way my complaint was handled”
- “I was satisfied with the actual outcome of my complaint”.

Figure 6.2: Satisfaction with Complaints



Clearly, whilst there would be an obvious predisposition for complainants to remain dissatisfied, these figure should still be seen as a concern. For example 55% of people disagree that they were satisfied with the way that their complaint was handled and 59% of people disagree that they were satisfied with the actual outcome of their complaint. In the COSLA benchmarking information which was made available to us, net agreement figures were achieved in relation to this question, albeit these figures related to only two councils.

6.4 We undertook further cross tabulation of the core data in order to understand these issues better.

The first point that can be made, is that dissatisfaction is greatest when complaints are made by:

- letter (73% dissatisfaction);
- e-mail (80% dissatisfaction) – although these figures are based on a small base;
- through a councillor (66% dissatisfaction);
- through an MP, MSP or MEP (71% dissatisfaction).

In our view, this trend reflects the perceived seriousness of the complaint, in so far as respondents are most likely to use these means when they perceive the issue to be a particularly important one.

Conversely, slightly fewer (54%) of those who made their complaint by telephone were dissatisfied.

6.5 A very small number of people had actually used the council's formal mechanism of the "Tell us What You Think" leaflet. When this had been utilised, however, dissatisfaction with complaint handling was lower at 39%. Unfortunately, only 9 respondents had made their complaint in this fashion.

6.6 There is a strong correlation between satisfaction with complaint handling and with the actual outcome of the complaint. Particularly in the context of a postal survey, it is very possible that respondents had not drawn a clear distinction in their mind between these two dimensions.

For example, of those who agreed strongly that they were satisfied with the actual outcome of their complaint, 85% were also satisfied with its handling. Conversely, of those who disagreed strongly that they were satisfied with the actual outcome of their complaint, 89% also disagreed that they were satisfied with the way it was handled.

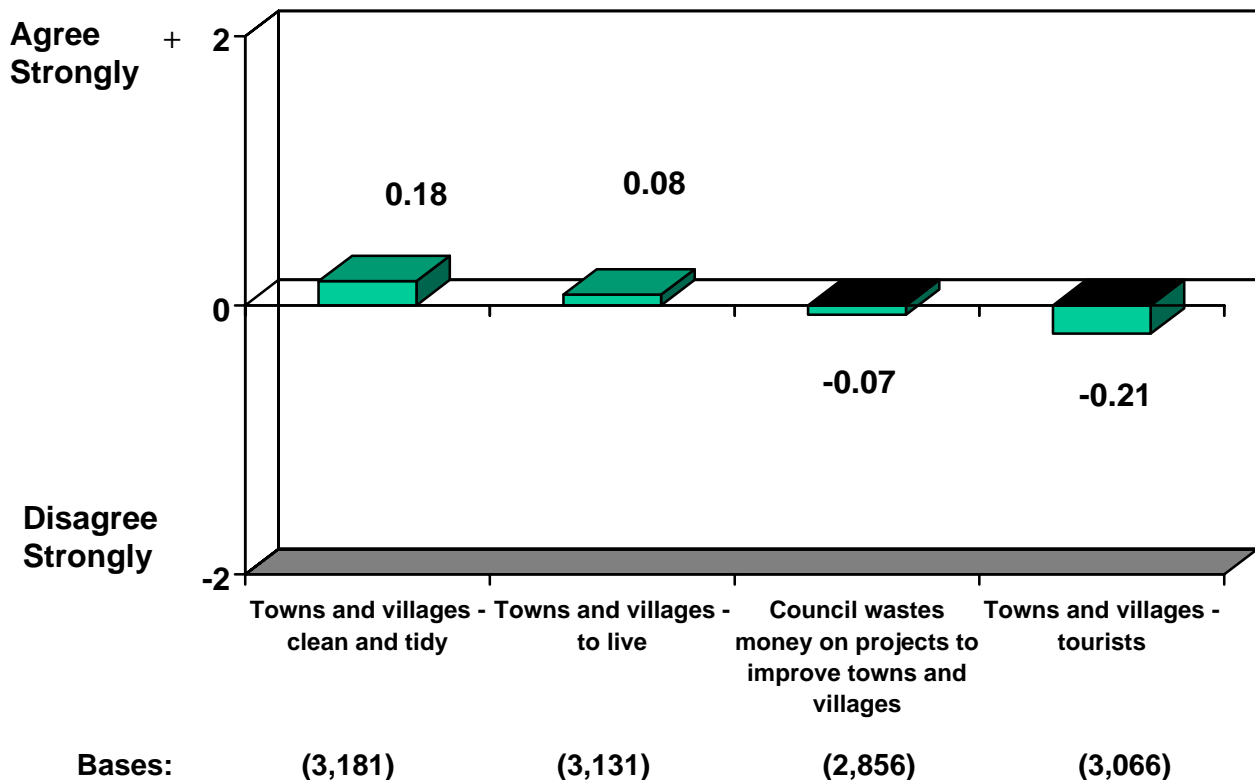
7.0 The communities of Aberdeenshire

7.1 Taking its lead from a number of the issues identified in the residents focus groups, and in developmental discussions with PEST, the survey included for the first time a series of questions relating to community issues within Aberdeenshire.

Firstly, a series of agree/disagree questions were asked in relation to the impact which the council has had on Aberdeenshire. These statements, the results to which are summarised in Figure 7.1 below, included:

- “The council does a good job in keeping towns and villages clean and tidy”.
- “The council does a good job in making towns and villages in Aberdeenshire attractive places to live”.
- “The council wastes money on projects to improve the look towns and villages”.
- “The council does a good job in making towns and villages in Aberdeenshire attractive places for tourists”.

Figure 7.1: The Communities of Aberdeenshire – Towns and Villages



There is modest agreement that the council does a good job in making towns and villages clean and tidy (50% agree against 28% who disagree).

Clearly, however, those who disagree represent a significant minority, to which should be added the 22% who express a neutral opinion on this matter. The areas where disagreement was greatest included Buchan (37% disagreement) and Kincardine and Mearns (35% disagreement).

7.2 Again, net agreement was fairly lukewarm in relation to the council making towns and villages attractive places to live (42% agreements against 30% disagreement). Disagreement was highest in Banff and Buchan (39%), Buchan (38%) and Kincardine and Mearns (35%).

7.3 There was slight disagreement that the council wastes money on projects to improve the looks of towns and villages. In fact, only 30% of respondents agreed that the council did indeed waste money. In at least some instances, these respondents will be commenting on the efficiency with which money is expended rather than on the purpose to which it is put. It seems reasonable to impute, therefore, that the majority of respondents do believe that investment in projects to improve the look of towns and villages is money well spent.

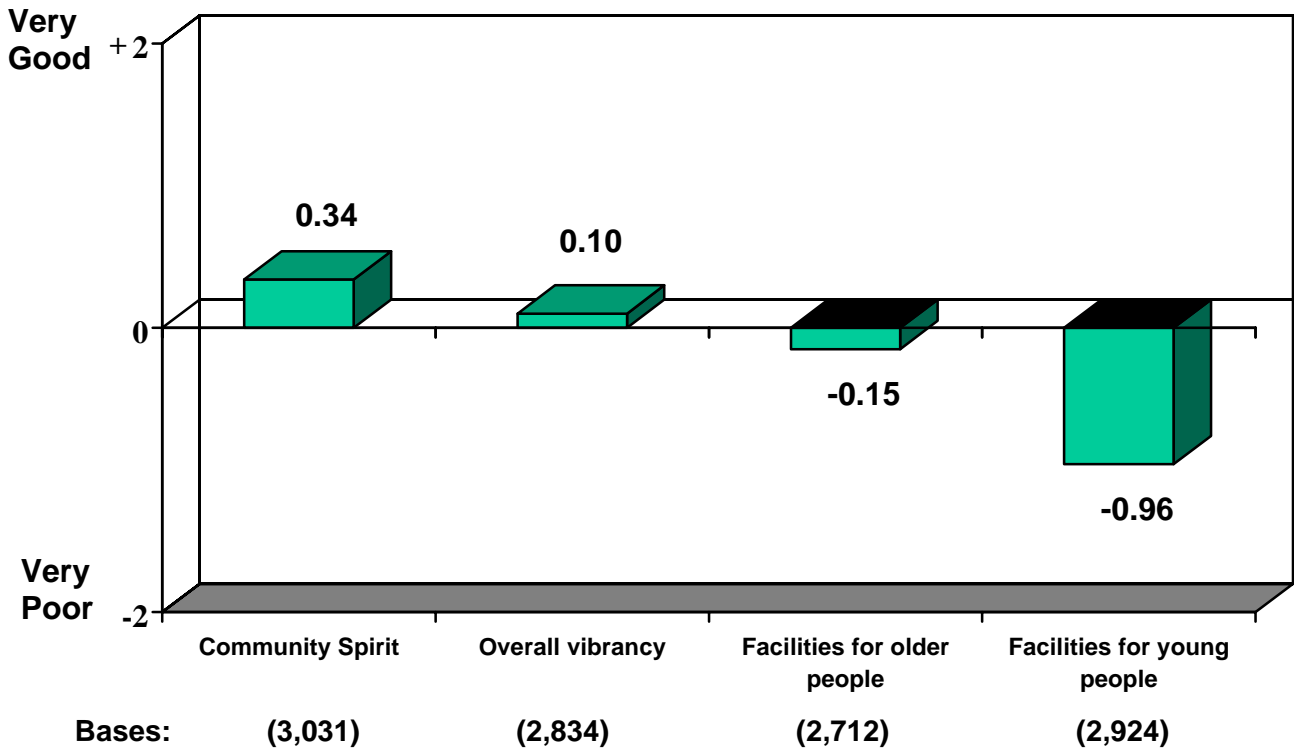
7.4 There is particular disagreement that the council does a good job in making towns and villages attractive places for tourists. 42% of respondents disagree with this contention and the view is particularly marked in Banff/Buchan (53%), Buchan (51%) and Kincardine and Mearns (48%).

7.5 Wider questions were asked in relation to a number of community issues including:

- sense of community spirit
- the overall vibrancy of the community
- facilities for older people
- facilities for young people.

The results of this are set out in Figure 7.2 over:

Figure 7.2: The Communities of Aberdeenshire – Community Issues



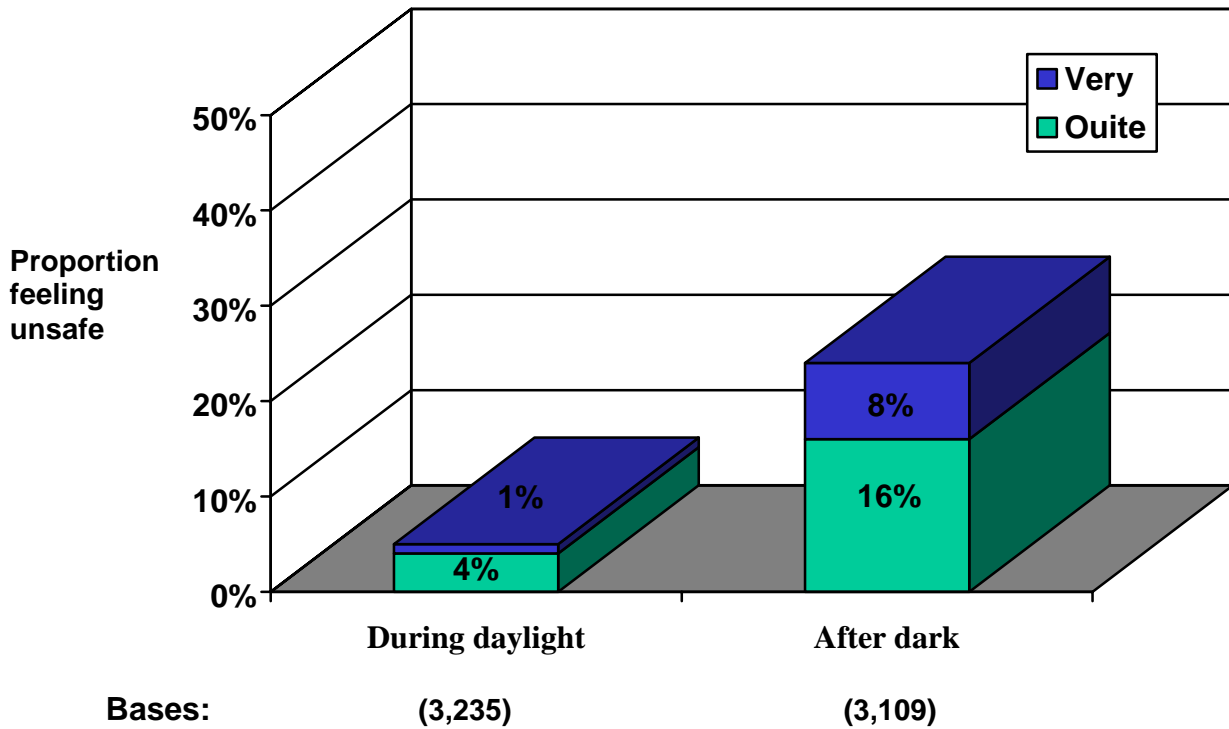
The focus groups had identified some signs of a perceived decline in community spirit. This was only partially evident from the quantitative research, with 21% of people rating their sense of community spirit in their town or village to be poor. Once again, Banff and Buchan (33%) and Buchan (34%) were most likely to express concerns over this issue. The same is true of the overall vibrancy of the community, where 27% of people rated this as being poor, compared to only 41% who perceived it to be good. 37% of people in Banff and Buchan and 44% of people in Buchan rated the overall vibrancy of their communities as being poor, which obviously gives some cause for concern.

7.6 Some concerns were expressed about facilities for older people. 39% of the sample rated these as poor, although perhaps paradoxically older people themselves were slightly less likely to provide such a rating (only 35% of 65-74 year olds and 30% of 75+ years olds did so).

7.7 The most striking result in relation to this question was the 74% of people who perceived facilities for young people to be poor. This view was widely held across all age groups and demographic criteria. It should be read alongside the qualitative observations made in the residents focus groups that, not only were there limited diversionary activities for young people in many towns and villages, but the travel costs inherent in accessing such facilities in other parts of Aberdeenshire or Aberdeen City were often prohibitive.

7.8 The final question under this heading related to issues of personal safety, both during daylight hours and after dark. Overall results of the question are set out in Figure 7.3 below:

Figure 7.3: The Communities of Aberdeenshire – Personal Safety



7.9 Only a very small proportion of people feel unsafe during daylight hours (5%). The only significant difference in opinion is again in Banff/Buchan (9% feel unsafe) and Buchan (12% feel unsafe).

A significant minority do, however, feel unsafe after dark although again, we would point out that this figure is much lower than in urban areas where we have undertaken similar survey work. A total of 24% say that they feel either quite or very unsafe after dark. This figure rises amongst the following categories of people:

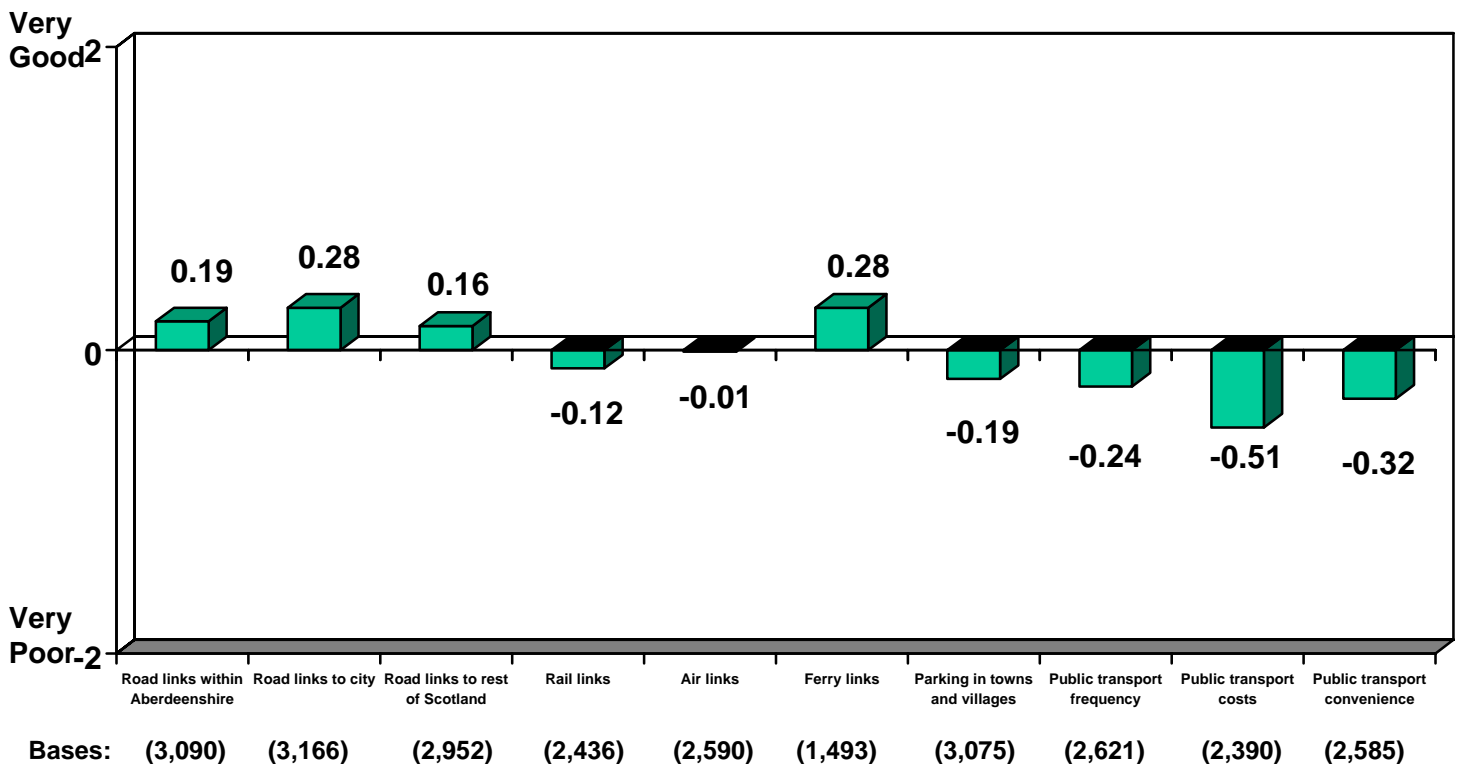
- females (although the figure only rises to 27%).
- people living in Banff and Buchan (38%).
- people living in Buchan (41%).

8.0 Roads and transportation

8.1 This issue has again been identified as one of significant importance within the focus groups. Respondents were informed that whilst Aberdeenshire Council was responsible for some road maintenance within the council area, that the maintenance of trunk roads was the responsibility of the Scottish Executive's private contractor. It was also pointed out that the council did not own or operate public transport, but that it did seek to influence public transport providers to make sure that Aberdeenshire residents' needs were met.

8.2 Views were sought on a range of issues relating to roads and transportation, with the respondents being asked to rate how good each of these elements were. The mean ratings for each of these dimensions are set out in Figure 8.1 below:

Figure 8.1: Roads and Transportation



8.3 The following key points may be made in relation to this issue:

- There is some limited disquiet about road links within Aberdeenshire (26% dissatisfaction). Dissatisfaction is highest amongst those living in Buchan (39%).
- Likewise, there is only limited concern about road links between individuals homes and Aberdeen City (27% rate these as poor, with those living in Buchan most likely to be negative (44%)).
- A similar pattern is evident with respect to road links to the rest of Scotland.

- Negative ratings are recorded in relation to rail links between Aberdeenshire and the rest of the UK, reflecting the fact that many areas of Aberdeenshire have limited rail services.
- The same can be said of the slightly negative ratings accorded to air links between Aberdeenshire and the rest of the UK.
- Although there was a high don't know response, those who did respond tended to rate ferry links to the Northern Isles reasonably positively (47% rated these links as good compared to only 17% who rated them as poor).
- A significant number of people (41%) rated the availability of parking in towns and villages as poor. Once again, those living in Buchan were most likely to be negative (51%).

8.4 A particular feature of this question was the negative findings in relation to various dimensions of public transport for example:

- 43% of people rate the frequency of public transport to and from the area which they live as being poor or very poor.
- 52% rate the cost of public transport links as being poor and 45% rate the convenience of public transport links as being poor.

Such views are fairly widely held across the different communities of Aberdeenshire.

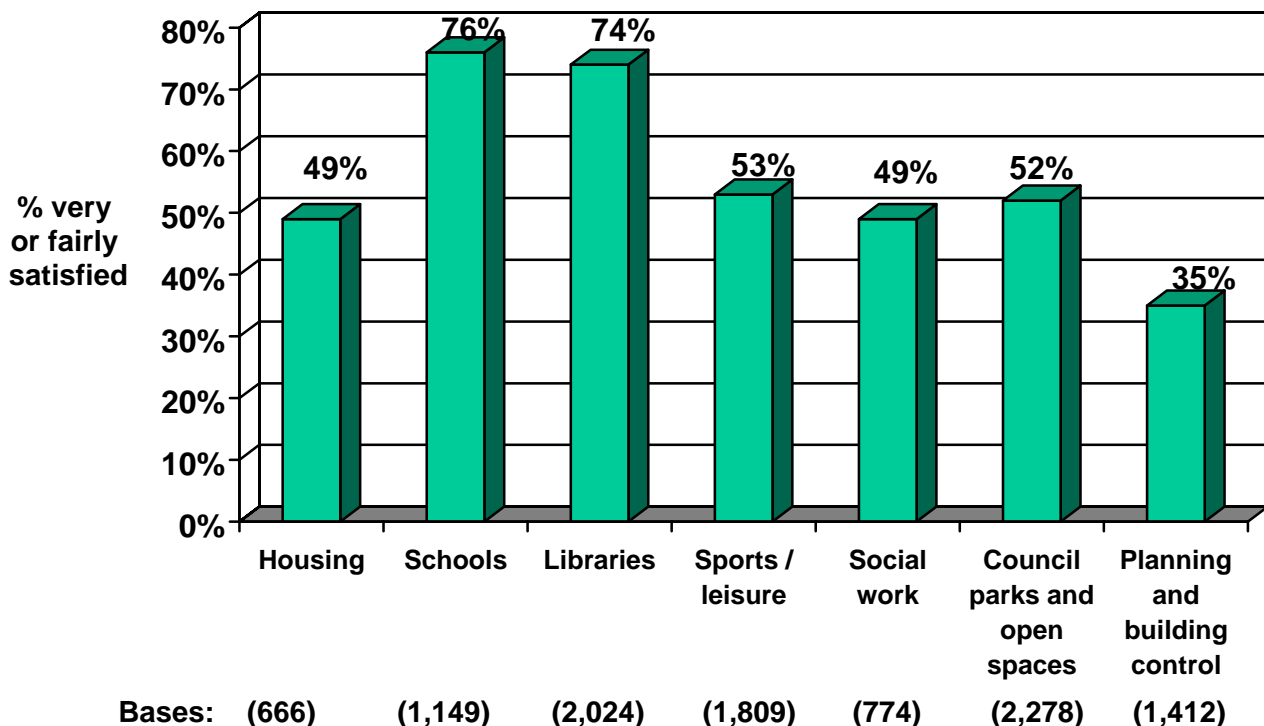
Whilst recognising that the council does not own or operate public transport, this issues must be taken on board as one in which Aberdeenshire residents have a particular interest. It should also be noted that the focus groups identified some degree of ambiguity on the part of members of the public as to the council's role in this area.

9.0 Satisfaction with key services

9.1 The satisfaction ratings accorded to a range of specific services, unique to particular client groups, are detailed in Figure 9.1 below.

Whilst similar questions were asked of some of these categories in the 2000 survey, the routing of the 2000 survey ensured that questions were only asked of those who had had specific recent experience of the service. This was precluded for reasons of space in 2002, meaning that the survey populations are not directly comparable.

Figure 9.1: Services You Use – Specific Services



9.2 There is clearly some good news evident in relation to these figures:

- 76% are satisfied with their children’s schools compared to 10% who are dissatisfied.
- 74% are satisfied with library services compared to 10% who are dissatisfied.
- 49% are satisfied with council housing services compared to 17% who are dissatisfied (we comment further on this below).
- 53% are satisfied with council run leisure and sports facilities compared to 21% who are dissatisfied.
- 52% are satisfied with council run parks and open spaces, but 24% are dissatisfied.
- 49% are satisfied with social work services, compared to 21% who are dissatisfied.

9.3 Indeed, the ratings for planning and building control are particularly poor (35% satisfied against 35% dissatisfied) and the reasons for this perhaps require further exploration.

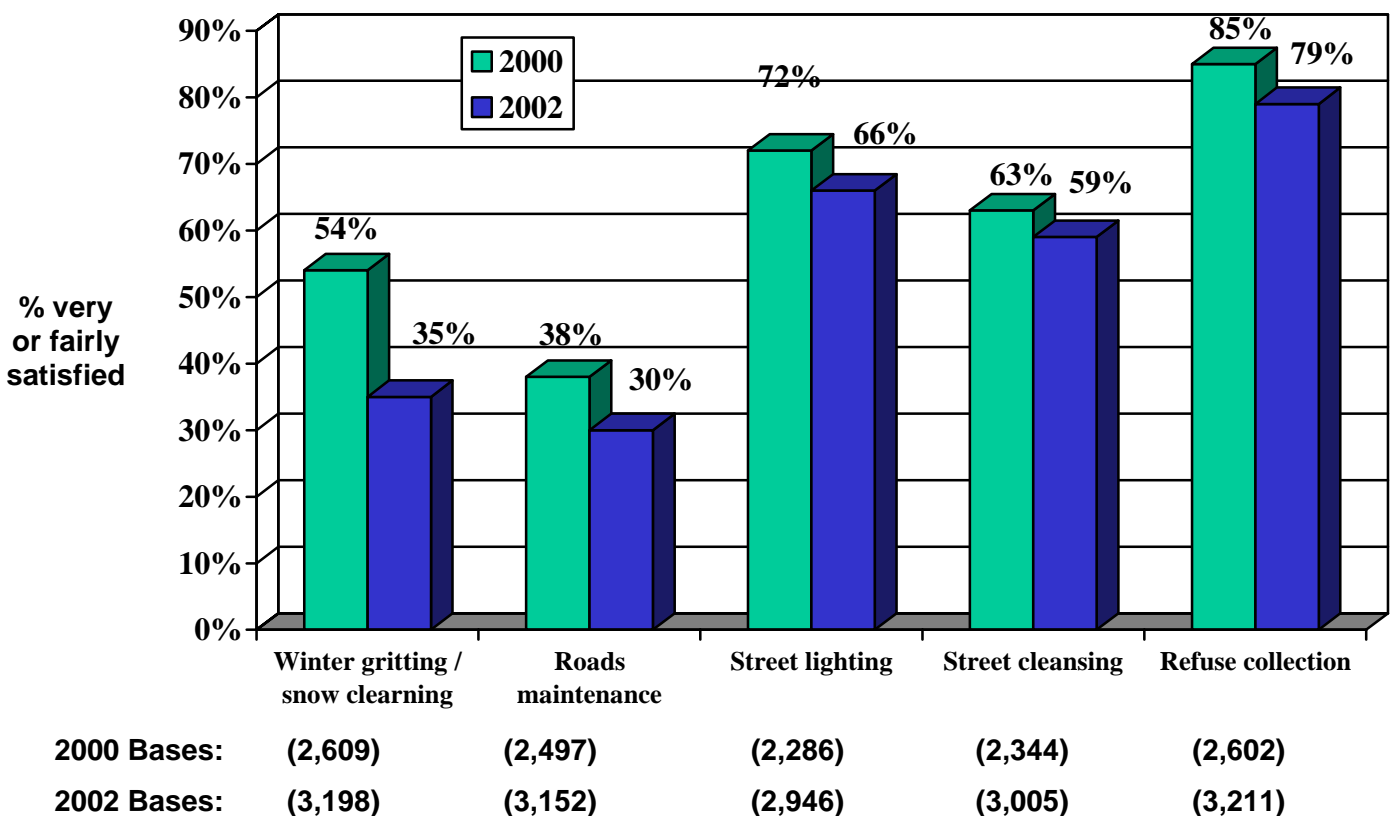
9.4 Further cross tabulation of this data does shed considerable light on the reasons for some of these ratings. Taking “council housing services” as an example, we note that 49% of those who responded expressed a level of satisfaction. However, many respondents were not in fact residents in council houses. Amongst those who actually were resident in council houses the satisfaction figure rises very significantly to 71%, with only 10% being dissatisfied.

9.5 The following additional points may also be made:

- for those who have children at council run schools, satisfaction ratings improved significantly;
- the same is true of those who are actual users of local libraries;
- and also those who are actual users of council run leisure and sports facilities.

Clearly, there is an evident trend where by actual users of services are much more likely to rate them positively than those who are non-users. The clear implication of this is that more negative perceptions are more often grounded in general perceptions than the reality of individuals service experiences. Individuals were asked to express their level of satisfaction with a range of universal services, in a manner consistent with that used in 2000. The results of this are detailed in Figure 9.2 below:

Figure 9.2: Services Everybody Uses – Universal Services



In many cases (eg, street lighting, street cleansing and refuse collection) there is a very slight downwards trend evident. This is of limited significance in our view, and may reflect a more negative sample generally. This in turn may be a reflection of growing expectations in terms of the delivery of public services, driven by the communication of public policy in this area more generally.

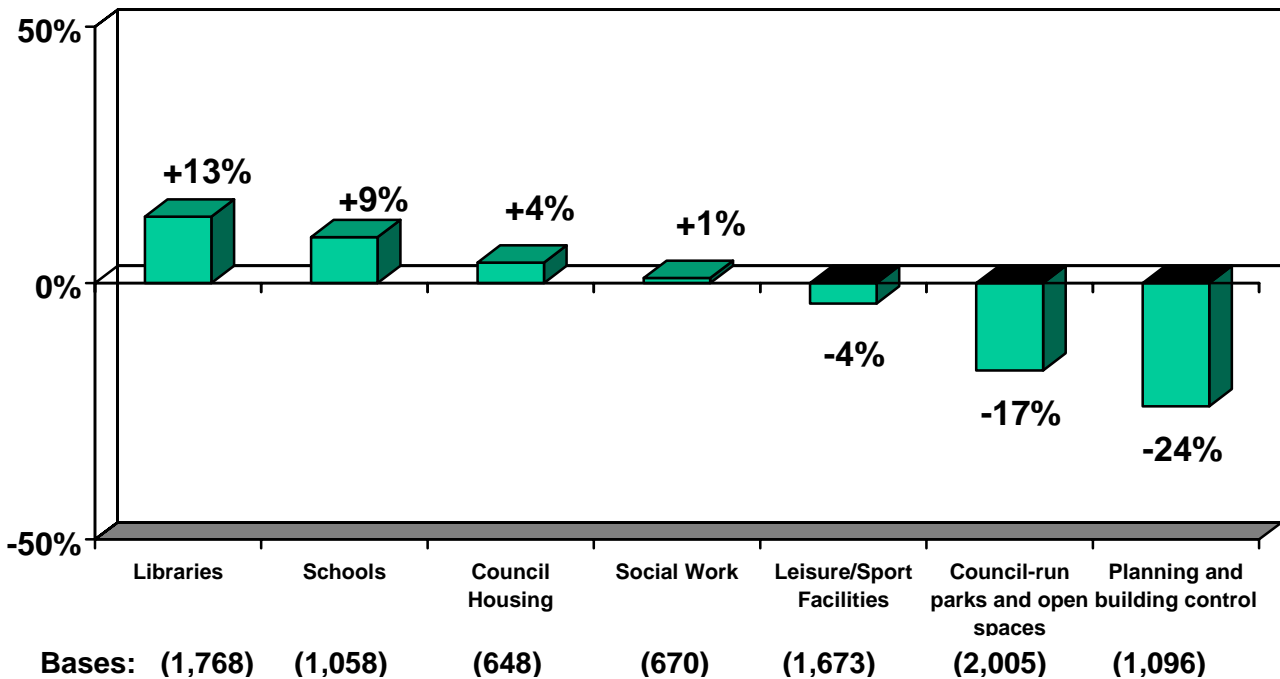
There are two areas, however, where the decline in satisfaction is worthy of particular note:

- Firstly, in relation to roads maintenance, where satisfaction levels have fallen from an already low 38% to 30%.
- A significant decline in satisfaction ratings in relation to winter gritting/snow clearing (51% now dissatisfied compared to 35% satisfied).

Clearly, consideration needs to be given to the level of resources targeted at this area.

9.6 The survey also asked people to comment on whether they perceived services to have got better or worse over the past three or four years. This is a robust method of measuring changes in perception of services, as it does not rely on the sampling methodology for 2000 and 2002 being identical. The 2002 results for individual services are set out in Figure 9.3 below. These calculations are based on the proportion of respondents who believe services have improved, less the proportion of respondents who believe they have got worse.

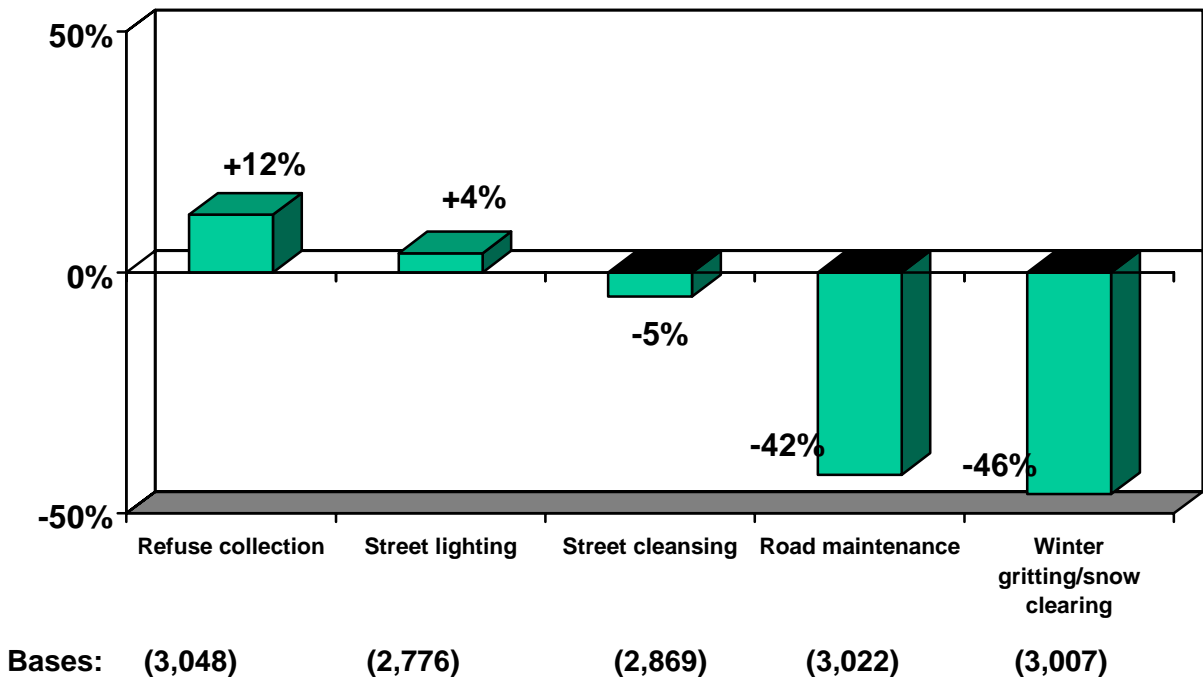
Figure 9.3: Changes in Service Perception: Services You Use



There are very encouraging ratings evident with respect to libraries and schools. However, concerns are apparent in relation to council-run parks and open spaces and planning/building control. In relation to the latter, we anticipate that these issues will be of a policy nature, rather than relating to service delivery, given the positive ratings achieved in 2001 for aspects of contact management within the planning function.

9.7 Figure 9.4 sets out similar findings.

Figure 9.4: Changes in Service Perception: Universal Services



The recurring themes of perceived worsening of roads maintenance and winter gritting/snow clearing are again apparent.

9.8 In relation to these services we can compare responses to a similar question which was asked in 2000. These figures chart the perceived changes in service performance over time. For example, in 2000, respondents were more likely to believe that schools had worsened over the three or four years running up to 2000. However, in 2002, they are more likely to believe that schools have improved in the three or four year period up to 2002.

These results are set out in figure 9.5 (a) and (b) on the next page.

Figure 9.5 (a): Trend Data in Relation to Specific Services

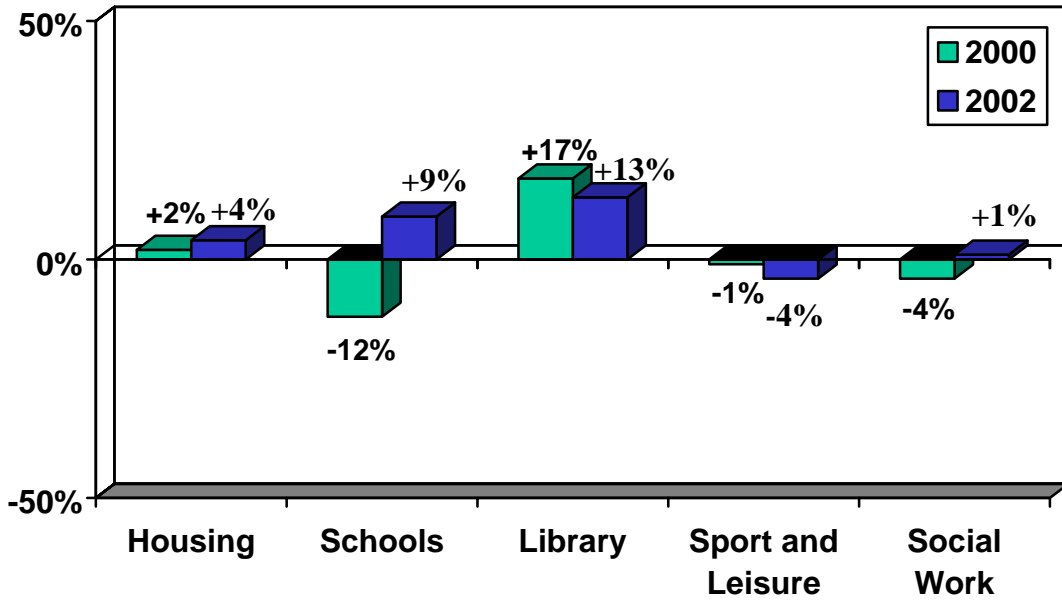
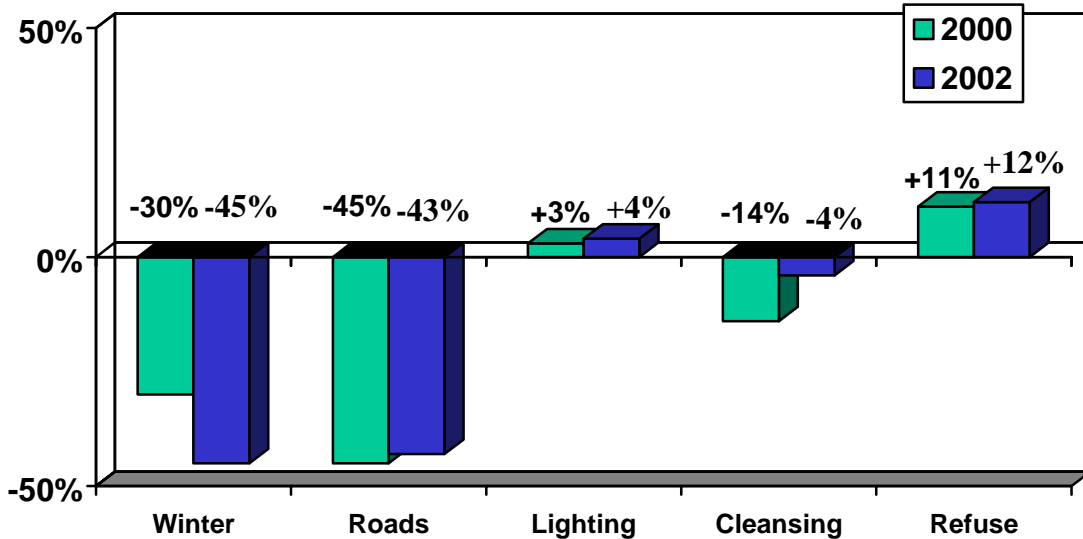


Figure 9.5 (b) Trend Data on Perceived Changes To Universal Services



2000 Bases:	(2,443)	(2,382)	(2,153)	(2,219)	(2,447)
2002 Bases:	(3,077)	(3,022)	(2,776)	(2,869)	(3,048)

9.9 To summarise, perceptions are:

Housing	-	Consistent perception of performance staying the same or improving slightly
Schools	-	A significant turnaround. Previously, schools were thought to be worsening. Now, people are more likely to believe they are improving.
Libraries	-	A general perception that they are continuing to improve.
Sport and leisure	-	Very little change in perceptions; possible indications of a very slight downwards trend in satisfaction.
Social work	-	More positive views than previously, but the extent of changes in perception is fairly modest.
Winter gritting/snow clearing	-	Perceived to be worsening by most people, a viewpoint that has been held for some time.
Roads maintenance	-	A similar trend to winter gritting/snow clearing.
Street lighting	-	A continued trend of modest improvement.
Cleansing	-	Still thought to be worsening, but this view is less apparent than it was in 2000.
Refuse collection	-	A service that is perceived to be continuing to improve.

9.10 It should be noted that, in some services, particularly winter gritting/snow clearing and roads maintenance, respondents are commenting on outcomes. They do not have enough information to make a robust judgement about efficiency. Despite this, their perceptions are still of value.

10.0 The world wide web

10.1 The survey went on to explore usage of the world wide web and attitudes to the delivery of council services online.

Firstly, respondents were asked whether they had, personally, in the past three months used the internet from each of the following sources:

Table 10.1: Usage of the Web

Home	48%
Work	26%
School/college	5%
Other public place	4%

Base: 3,330

The 48% who have used the Internet from home is in line with national figures (IDC research consultancy, in a report commissioned by the EU, calculated household internet penetration in the UK to be 46% in March 2002). It is very closely correlated with age. For example, 78% of those aged 18 or under and 65% of those aged 19-24 had accessed to the internet from their home in the past three months. There also appeared to be some correlation with affluence. For example, only 16% of those living in council houses had accessed the internet from home in the past three months and only 28% of unemployed people. A significant minority used the internet at their place of work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this tendency was greatest amongst those who were in full time employment where the figure was 50%.

Students (88 respondents) were very likely to have accessed the Internet from their school or college (80% had done so).

As yet access to the internet from other public access points is very limited.

10.2 The level of interest in accessing a variety of council services online is summarised in Table 10.2 below.

Table 10.2: Interest in Council Services Online

General Information	40%
FAQs	36%
General enquiries	31%
Routine transactions	28%
Applying for things	26%

Base: 3,330

The following brief points should be noted.

- Those most interested in accessing general information on topical issues online are aged 19-24 (49%), 25-34 (51%) and 35-44 (56%).
- Similarly these age groups are most likely to be interested in using the internet for frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- Although interest is somewhat lower for the other options identified, significant minorities of certain age groups are interested in utilising these services. For example, 43% of those in the 35-44 year old age group would be interested in using the internet for routine transactions (booking leisure facilities, special refuge uplifts etc) and 37% of the same age group would be interested in using the internet for applying for things (such as parking permits, home carers etc.).

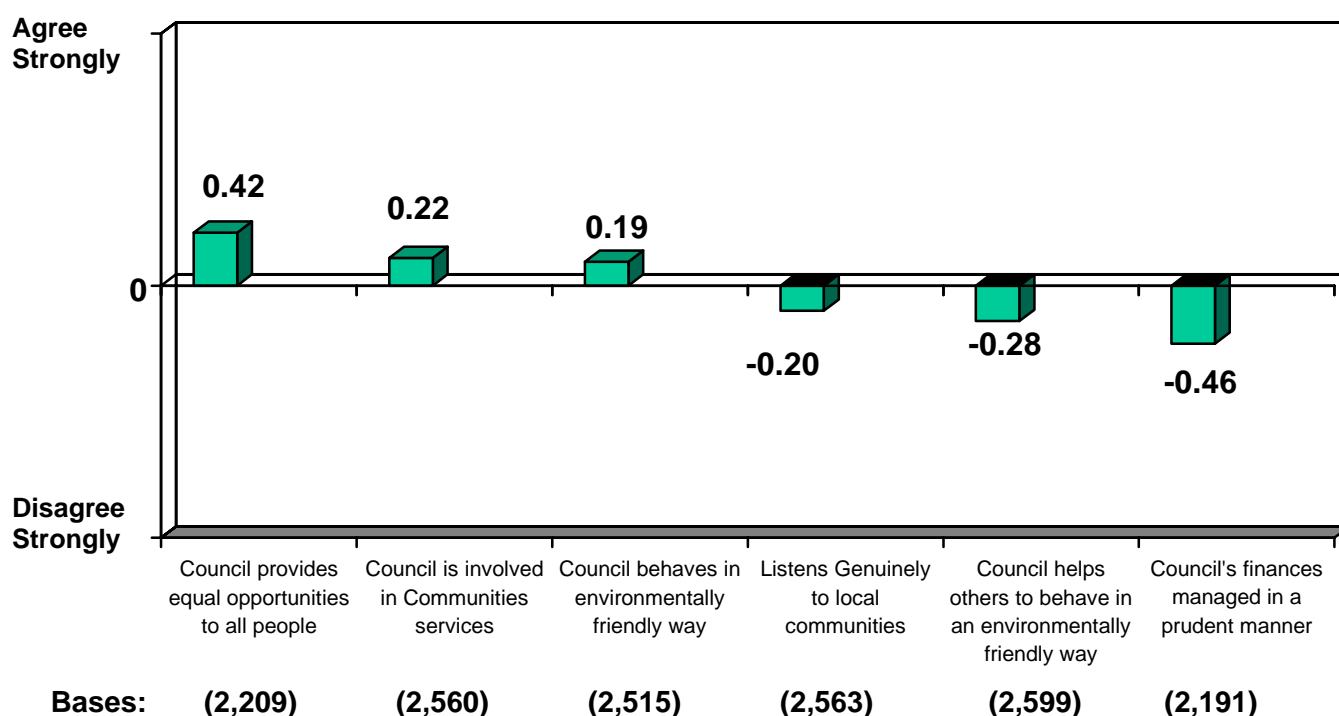
10.3 It should be borne in mind that the figures quoted above are for the sample as a whole, when the levels of interest in accessing various services are related back to actual usage of the internet, then it becomes apparent that a much higher percentage of actual users are interested in accessing such services online.

This factor is of particular importance given the continued roll-out of home usage of the internet, particularly among younger age groups.

11.0 Social responsibility

11.1 For the first time, the survey explored communities' attitudes to a number of issues around the theme of social responsibility. In large part, these issues were identified via the initial focus group. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements relating to dimensions of the council acting as a socially responsible organisation. The results of this are set out in 11.1 below:

Figure 11.1: Measure of Council as Socially Responsible Organisation



11.2 The following specific points may be made.

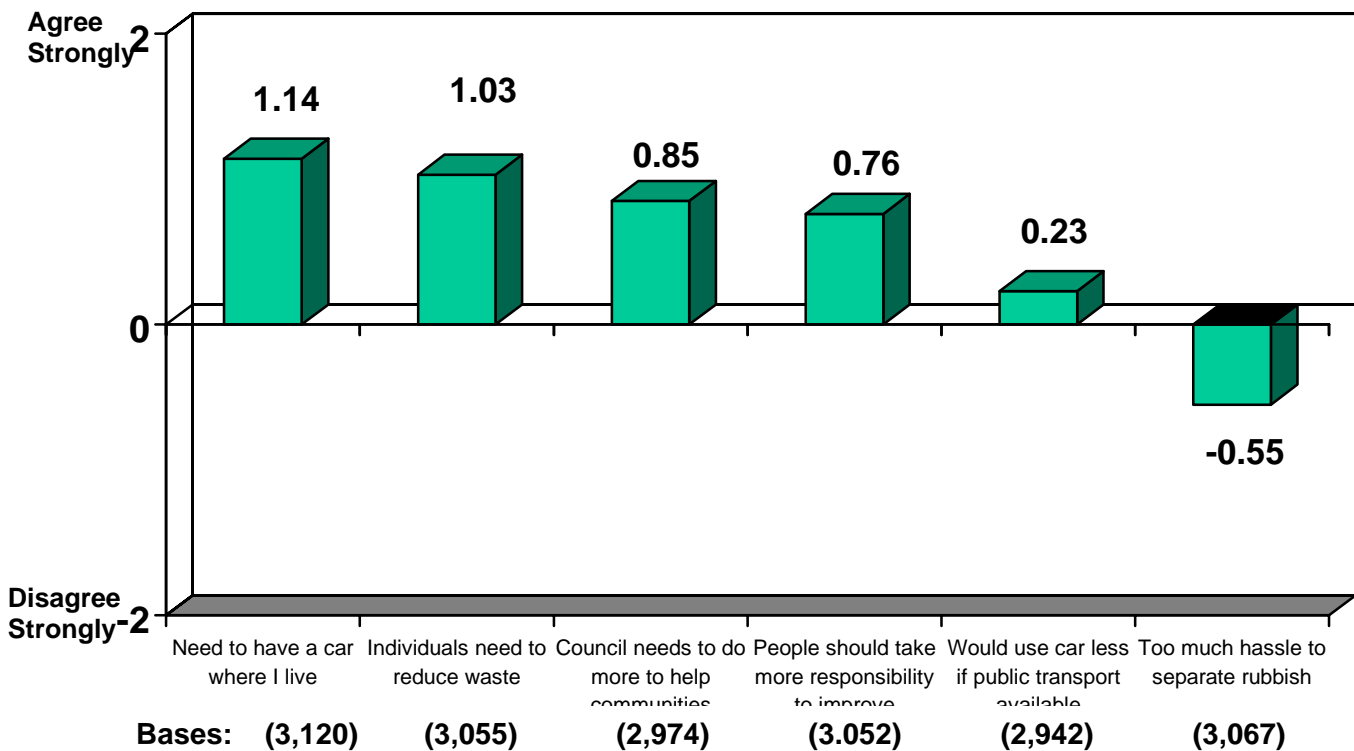
- There is general agreement that the council provides “equal opportunities to all people” (51% agreement against 13% agreement). These results do not vary significantly by gender or age.
- There is a somewhat lukewarm agreement with the statement that “the council is involved in the communities it serves” (40% agreement against 9% disagreement).
- Most people believe that the council behaves in an environmentally friendly way (40% agreement against 21% disagreement). The reasons for the minority disagreement are not apparent, and are worthy of further investigation.
- There is considerable scepticism as to whether the council listens genuinely to the views of local communities (only 23% agree with this assertion against 39% who disagree). Disagreement is highest in Banff and Buchan (45%).

- There is also considerable disagreement that the council does enough to help individuals to behave in an environmentally friendly way (only 23% agree with this view compared to 44% who disagree). This implies the potential for a “contract” between the community and the council and, indeed, for enhanced communication, of the means by which the council can help others help themselves.

11.3 The relatively high level of disagreement that the council’s finances are managed in a prudent manner (49%) is somewhat surprising given the results of the focus groups. In this more in depth environment, most participants felt that the council was indeed prudent, at least in the sense of not being an excessively risk-taking organisation. It may be that the perceived lack of prudence highlighted in the quantitative research, is illustrative of the points made earlier in relation to a broader perception that the council does not make efficient use of its resources, a view which is held of most local authorities.

11.4 The survey went on to profile individuals views in relation to a number of aspects of social responsibility. These are detailed in figure 11.2:

Figure 11.2: Social Responsibility – Public Attitudes



The key points emerging from this analysis are as follows:

- Strong and universal acceptance, at least on the surface, that individuals themselves need to do more to reduce the waste materials they produce. This is a very strong view, held by 71% of the total.
- A strong majority view (held by 82% of people) that it “is necessary to have a car where I live.” Perhaps concerningly, many people (only 48%) say that they would make less of a car if better public transport was available.

People believe both that the council needs to do more to help local communities (73% agreement) but also that “people should take more responsibility themselves for improving their local communities” (72% agreement). This further illustrates the potential for a contract between community and council in so far as these approaches to the challenge are not mutually exclusive.

- 11.5** The number of people who disagree that “it is too much hassle to separate out rubbish for recycling” (62%) is reasonably encouraging. Just over 1 in 5 (21%) of people agree with this contention and only 3% agree strongly. Again, these views are very widely held.

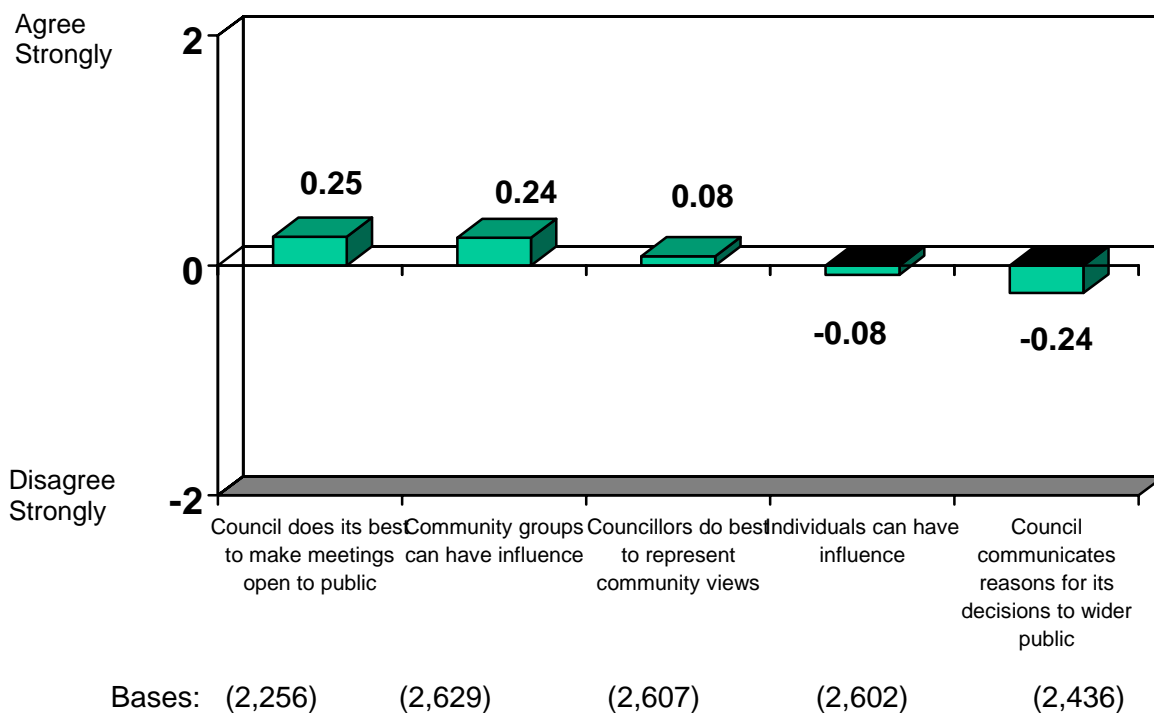
12.0 Council decision making

12.1 56% of the sample stated that they know who their local councillor is. This compares with only 43% of adults in the Scotland-wide Scottish household survey. The results are, however, very closely correlated with age, with, for example, only 30% of 19-24 year olds saying that they know who their local councillor is, but 71% of those in the 65-74 year old age bracket doing so.

12.2 Only 53% of people say that they would know how to contact their local councillor, which leaves some scope for improvement. Again this is particularly evident in the lower age groups (only 37% of those aged 19-24 would know how to contact their local councillor).

12.3 Attitudes in relation to a number of dimensions of council decision making are set out in figure 12.1 below.

Figure 12.1: Council Decision Making



The following key points may be made with regard to these issues:

- There is general, if lukewarm, agreement that the council does its best to make council meetings open to the public (44% agreement against 19% disagreement).
- Similarly, there is some level of agreement that local community groups can have an influence on council decisions (50% against 24%). However, only 36% of people believe that local individuals can have an influence on council decisions.

- Opinions are polarised as to whether councillors do their best to represent the views of their local community (39% agree against 27% who disagree).

The above views are commonly held across a range of demographic criteria.

- 12.4** The theme of wider corporate communications has been evident at various points throughout the survey and is again evident in relation to the lower level of agreement that “the council communicates the reasons for its decisions to the wider public”. Only 22% of people agree with this contention, compared to 41% who disagree. Again, this disagreement is relatively widespread across demographic criteria.

13.0 Quantitative findings in relation to the “council scorecard”

13.1 The residents focus groups led to the development of a “council scorecard” which consisted of the following attributes:

- efficient
- delivering quality outputs (“gets the job done”)
- accessible
- co-ordinated
- focused on the different needs of its communities
- fair
- trustworthy
- willing to listen
- independent
- visibly engaged with local communities
- advocacy.

In this section, some of the highlights of the quantitative residents survey are related to this “scorecard”.

13.2 Efficient

- Overall net satisfaction ratings (at 16%) are above the average for councils in Scotland, and have not changed significantly over the past two years. Respondents are slightly more likely to think Aberdeenshire is better than other councils than to think it is worse.
- 24% of respondents believe the council does the best it can with the money available to it, compared to 43% who disagree. This may be as much an issue of communications as reality.

13.3 Delivering quality outputs (“gets the job done”)

Different perceptions are evident for various services, as described in Section 9. In summary, there are positive perceptions of:

- schools
- libraries
- refuse collection.

there are lukewarm views in relation to:

- housing
- sport and leisure
- social work
- street lighting
- cleansing.

There are negative views in relation to:

- winter gritting/snow clearing
- roads maintenance.

13.4 Accessible

- 65% of people find it easy to contact the council compared to 13% who disagree.
- 60% were satisfied with their most recent contact against 17% who were not.
- There is a general level of satisfaction across a range of service attributes (friendliness, helpfulness etc.)
- There is some limited interest in the publication of direct line telephone numbers (39%) and extended weekday telephone availability (35%).

13.5 Co-ordinated

- 25% of people were satisfied with the extent to which they were kept updated in their most recent contact, against 46% who were dissatisfied.
- The council receives positive, if lukewarm ratings for service attributes such as “Providing a range of help and services from a single place” and “Being consistent in the information they give you”.

13.6 Focused on the different needs of its communities

There are geographical nuances in many of the findings. However, it is our belief that the higher levels of dissatisfaction in some areas are more likely to be correlated with factors such as affluence, and remoteness from the “centre” than actual council service performance.

13.7 Fair

- 51% believe the council provides equal opportunities to all, compared to 13% who disagree.
- There is 24% net dissatisfaction with the council’s handling of complaints.

13.8 Trustworthy

- 49% disagree that the council’s finances are managed in a prudent manner. We believe that this is a comment on efficiency, rather than prudent and sound financial management *per se*.
- The council achieves slightly negative ratings for the customer service attribute: “doing what they say they will do”. This may, in part, be an issue of ongoing communication with the consumer of council services.

13.9 Willing to listen

- 23% believe the council listens genuinely to local communities against 39% who disagree.
- 22% believe the council communicates the reasons for its decisions to the wider public, against 41% who disagree.

13.10 Independent

- 39% agree that councillors do their best to represent the views of the local community, against 27% who disagree.

13.11 Visibly engaged with local communities

- 56% of people claim to know their local councillor, compared to 43% in Scotland as a whole.
- 38% of respondents were satisfied with the information they receive on council services, but 16% were dissatisfied and 37% were unsure.

13.12 Advocacy

- Only 28% of people are able to say that the council does a good job in encouraging others to invest in Aberdeenshire.

14.0 Conclusions from the quantitative survey

- 14.1** The evidence is that there have been little changes in net satisfaction ratings for Aberdeenshire Council overall, over the past few years. The council's efforts at service improvement have, most likely, been accompanied by increasing demands on the part of consumers, against a background of some disaffection with public services generally.

In particular, considerable scepticism is evident as to whether the council makes effective use of the money available to it.

However, the evidence is that this is a perception held of local authorities generally and, indeed, Aberdeenshire residents are more likely to believe their council to be better than other authorities, than to believe it to be worse.

- 14.2** In general, most people find it easy to contact the council and only a small minority express dissatisfaction with their most recent contact.

Good ratings are received for a range of contact management attributes, although much poorer perceptions are evident with regard to how well customers are kept updated.

The most popular options for improving contact are the publication of direct line telephone numbers and extended weekday telephone availability.

Most of the sources of information used by residents are not in the council's control. There is, however, a demand for more direct communication from the council, including over the internet.

- 14.3** The council attains positive service ratings for issues such as courtesy and plain language. Many customers do not believe, however, that clear explanations are often given for decisions which are made.

- 14.4** There is a significant level of dissatisfaction with the council's complaint handling, although this is closely correlated to the actual outcomes of complaints.

- 14.5** Although the council is seen as now doing a reasonable job in keeping towns and villages clean and tidy, residents still believe that more should be done to improve these communities, and to enhance their overall vibrancy and appeal to residents.

In particular, there is a very strong view that facilities for young people in Aberdeenshire's communities are poor.

- 14.6** Particular concerns are evident with respect to the frequency, cost and convenience of public transport within Aberdeenshire.

- 14.7** Positive service ratings overall are evident with respect to schools and libraries.

Lukewarm satisfaction ratings are evident overall with respect to council housing services, sports and leisure facilities, social work and council-run parks and open spaces. There is, however, compelling evidence that satisfaction ratings are skewed downwards by the broad perceptions of non-service users, and that service users are actually much more positive about their experiences.

There are strongly negative perceptions of planning and building control. We consider these perceptions to be related to policy, rather than service delivery issues.

- 14.8** The council retains reasonable satisfaction ratings in relation to refuse collection, street lighting and street cleansing, which are broadly similar to results from 2000.

Ratings for road maintenance (not necessarily council-maintained roads) and, more particularly, winter gritting/snow clearing have declined significantly, however. A significant number of people believe performance to have worsened in these two areas.

- 14.9** More positively, libraries and schools are believed to be improving.

- 14.10** Usage of the web is becoming more apparent amongst Aberdeenshire residents, particularly young people. There is a good level of potential demand for accessing council services online.

- 14.11** Whilst the council is believed to behave in an environmentally friendly way, there remains a belief that it could do more to help others.

There appears to be a positive willingness to face up to individual responsibilities in terms of waste management. However, the challenge of encouraging less use of private motor cars is a much greater one.

- 14.12** Aberdeenshire residents are more likely than the norm to know whom their local councillor is. However, there is scepticism as to whether the council listens genuinely to the views of local communities, and whether individuals can have a real influence.

- 14.13** Many people believe that the council should do more to communicate the reasons for its decisions to the wider public.