



Residents survey 2003
Final report

Prepared For:
Aberdeenshire Council
Woodhill House
Westburn Road
Aberdeen
AB16 5GB

November 2003

CONTENTS

	Page
1.0 Executive summary	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Focus group summary	1
1.3 Telephone research summary	4
2.0 Background	7
3.0 Terms of reference	7
4.0 Report structure	8
5.0 Research methodology	9
5.1 Focus groups	10
5.2 Telephone survey	10
6.0 Findings	14
6.1 Focus group research	14
6.2 Telephone research	19
- Contacting the council	20
- Access to council services	22
- Using the website	27
- Frequently asked questions	28
- Complaint handling	31
7.0 Principal conclusions and recommendations	35
7.1 Conclusions	35
7.2 Recommendations	40
Figure 1 Profile of respondents	12
Figure 2 Council services contacted in last 12 months	20
Figure 3 Most common & preferred method of contact	22
Figure 4 Most important aspects when contacting by telephone	23
Figure 5 Helpful aspects when contacting by telephone	24
Figure 6 Agreement with aspects of service when telephoning	25
Figure 7 Most important aspects when contacting in person	26
Figure 8 Helpful aspects when contacting in person	28
Figure 9 Issues of importance	29

Figure 10	Nature of complaint	31
Figure 11	Aspects of satisfaction regarding complaints	32
Figure 12	How information is currently & would like to be received (2002)	33
Figure 13	How information is currently & would like to be received (2003)	34
Table 1	Profile of focus group attendees	10
Table 2	Agreement with aspects of service when telephoning	24
Table 3	Agreement of aspects of service when contacting in person	27
Table 4	Issues of most importance (FAQs)	30
Appendix I	Focus group research supporting information	43
Appendix II	Telephone survey data tables (under separate cover)	

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 In 2003, Aberdeenshire Council commissioned research involving 6 focus groups with 52 residents and telephone interviews with 401 residents. A total of 108 (27%) of the residents' interviews were with people that had contacted the council during the past 12 months.
- 1.1.2 TL Dempster Strategy and Research ("TLD") was commissioned to carry out this research. The objective of the research was to assist the council to develop a meaningful and effective multi-channel communications strategy.
- 1.1.3 The research explored residents' experiences, perceptions and aspirations in relation to three key areas that are pertinent to the theme of developing a multi-channel communications strategy, namely: accessing council services; communications with the council; and complaints handling.
- 1.1.4 This executive summary provides an overview of the results of this research. Throughout the executive summary and subsequent report, certain statistics are quoted from the telephone interviews. For ease of understanding, a numbering system (¹ or ²) is used to indicate to which component part of the survey these statistics relate. Statistics followed by a ¹ relate to the sub-sample of telephone survey respondents who had communicated with the council in the past 12 months. The sample size for this sub-sample is 108 respondents. The statistics followed by a ² refer to the sample of telephone respondents that comprised those who had not communicated with the council during the past 12 months, plus those that had i.e. sub-sample¹. The sample size of sample ² is 401 respondents.

1.2 Focus groups summary

- 1.2.1 Focus groups were held with 52 residents. Feedback from the focus groups indicated that telephone is the preferred method for people to communicate with the council. The second most appropriate form of communication is face- to-face. The most frequently contacted service areas are roads, finance, planning and housing.
- 1.2.2 Focus group attendees recognised 6 classes of interaction with the council. These were:
- requesting a service
 - making a booking
 - paying for a service
 - requesting information or applying for something
 - obtaining advice
 - making a complaint.
- 1.2.3 Focus group attendees have clear expectations in relation to the quality of communication with the council. These comprise:
- clear points of contact
 - clear communication of how enquiries will be handled

- employees who can take responsibility for simple decisions
 - efficient handling of enquiries
 - courtesy, patience and empathy when dealing with residents' enquiries.
- 1.2.4 When discussing the matter of computerised call handling systems, focus groups attendees expressed a strong preference for the "human-touch". It would therefore appear that the attendees at the focus groups do not want to communicate with the council using touch-tone telephone systems.
- 1.2.5 The focus groups examined the issue of frequently asked questions (FAQs), ie, what questions should the council be able to answer promptly. The suggestions made by members of the focus groups were: council tax queries, weather reports, gritting schedule, recycling facilities, emergency service questions, street lighting.
- 1.2.6 Focus group attendees tended to agree that the council needed to communicate better. A total of 88% of attendees (46 people) would like to have better information on what the council is doing, whilst 87% (45 people) would like more information. The forms of communication suggested by focus group attendees were varied but included newsletters and e-mail information. A full list of these forms of communication is provided at Appendix I.
- 1.2.7 As most focus group attendees either communicated, or preferred to communicate with the council by telephone, it was thought that communication could be improved by publishing a list of council services ("a sort of A to Z") that showed which numbers to call for different types of service.
- 1.2.8 Sections of the focus groups felt that the council website could be used for communicating a range of information about services. It was further suggested that the site could also be used to make complaints or suggestions to the council. It has been noted by TLD that the council website already provides a range of information and service capabilities and that the issue exposed by the focus groups research may in fact be one of raising awareness of the site with these groups.
- 1.2.9 Within the focus groups, certain attendees perceived that the council was bureaucratic and inefficient. This perception was compounded by the fact the tax levels have risen while services have not improved (perception). There is also a perception amongst certain attendees that the council's decision-making structure is not effective.
- 1.2.10 The focus group attendees broadly agreed that there was a need for the council to prepare more informative information on what it does, eg, with the council tax. Two ideas were suggested by the focus groups for improving communication in this area:
- A stakeholder report that expands on what the council has done with tax-payers' money, and what it plans for the year ahead

- A quarterly news-sheet for all households that explains what the council has been doing in the course of the quarter, including articles on separate services explaining what they do, how to contact them, etc. This could be split into 6 area sections so that local news could be found easily.

- 1.2.11 Within the focus groups, 1 in 3 respondents had experience of “complaining” to the council. The most common types of “complaint” made included some form of perceived service failure, eg, streetlights not working, parking, street cleaning, litter and planning-building control matters. Focus group attendees noted a difference however between a dialogue and a complaint. Dialogue is looking for a way to improve things (possibly done by telephone) whereas complaints are when something goes wrong (often put in writing).
- 1.2.12 There is frequently a difference in the definition of a complaint between the council and the focus group attendees. What is reported in this document is how the focus group attendees define complaints, which we believe to be different from the council’s approach.
- 1.2.13 Ultimately, the underlying issue here is how the complaint is handled, whilst recognising that unresolved complaints are likely to be a source of criticism for the complainant. Keeping this context in mind, having contacted the council to complain, focus group attendees expect the following level of service from a generic complaints handling procedure:
- Would expect person answering the telephone to be able to action the complaint and or record it.
 - Would expect call back in 24 hours, and if appropriate, written acknowledgement of complaint in 48 hours (if matter was serious).
- 1.2.14 Once again it is recognised that most of these service standards are already in place and that the requirement here may be to ensure that when complaints are received, the complainant is made aware of the existence of these service standards.
- 1.2.15 Possible enhancements suggested to the current complaints handling procedures included introducing compensation if you've been treated unfairly and your complaint is upheld and clear explanations of how decisions have been arrived at. Two focus group members who felt they had been unfairly treated on a planning and building control issue made this last point. Once again, we note that the current complaint-handling procedure of the council provides for compensation in appropriate cases.
- 1.2.16 It was suggested by the focus groups that complaint-handling should also follow standard procedures and have boundaries set for timing and process. Focus group attendees suggested that council employees need clear guidelines on the subject matter of the complaint as well as the complaints procedure. Once again, these were views expressed by attendees that had limited experience of complaining to the council and reflected their

perceptions of a desirable complaints handling process. As it is known that many of these standards and procedures are already in place, the recommendation is to ensure that complainants are made aware of them at the outset of the complaints process.

- 1.2.17 It is apparent that when complaining, focus group attendees expect courtesy and a sympathetic ear. It was further suggested that if the council adopted a positive attitude to handling complaints this would help. Another suggestion made was that when residents make a complaint, they should be thanked for making a contribution to improving council services.
- 1.2.18 The great majority of focus group attendees had never seen the “*Tell Us What You Think*” booklet. More marketing of this booklet was suggested.

1.3 Telephone research summary

- 1.3.1 Approximately 1 in 3 respondents² had made a direct communication with the council in the past 12 months. The five most frequently contacted services were council tax, housing repair, planning - building control, roads/lighting and refuse collection.¹
- 1.3.2 75%¹ of respondents most commonly communicated with the council by telephone. Visiting a local office (11%)¹ is the second most frequently used communication method.
- 1.3.3 Thinking about telephone communication, survey respondents feel that the most important attributes here are: “employees having detailed knowledge” of services; “not being transferred or sent to other places”; “all services being available at the point of contact”. It is evident that the most important attributes are concerned with the quality of the telephone experience.
- 1.3.4 60%² of respondents overall feel that (a) the publication of direct line telephone numbers on specific services and (b) a 12 hour telephone service, would make it easier for people to communicate with the council. Respondents are generally opposed to dealing with recorded information systems when communicating the council.
- 1.3.5 Around 1 in 3 respondents² have a preference for using a local area office when dealing with organisations such as the council. 17%² feel that it is important to have face-to-face contact whenever you are getting in touch with the organisation.
- 1.3.6 Attributes such as having knowledgeable employees, all services being available at the point of contact, and not being sent to other locations are seen as important by respondents when the council is delivering face-to-face services.
- 1.3.7 30%² of respondents would find having more local offices to be particularly helpful when communicating with the council. A similar proportion would consider evening and weekend opening to be helpful. However, the great-

est aid to communicating with the council in person would be extended opening hours.

- 1.3.8 When asked about internet use, 35%² of respondents stated that they used this service from home. This is a smaller proportion than suggested by the 2002 survey, but is in line with the results of the Scottish Household Survey (2001-02).
- 1.3.9 Whilst 3%¹ of respondents claim to receive information on the council and its services by internet, 10%² state that they would prefer to receive information on the council this way. This suggests a latent demand for more services delivered using the web.
- 1.3.10 It is worth noting here that around 65%² of respondents state they would never contact the council using the website. However, when respondents were asked which range of services they would be interested in accessing online, 35%² chose one or more of the following:
- General information on topical issues, eg, school holidays, bin collections, etc (30% respondents expressing interest)²
 - General enquiries about specific services, eg, road closures, changes to council services, etc (26% respondents expressing interest)²
 - Frequently asked questions, eg, school holidays, bin collections, opening hours etc (20% respondents expressing interest)²
- 1.3.11 The majority of respondents in the 65 plus age category would not use the internet to communicate with the council. By contrast, 55%² of 18 to 44 year olds would use this contact method.
- 1.3.12 The exploration of frequently asked questions (FAQs), indicated that the top rated communication themes were emergency telephone contact numbers, emergency help and support, information on road gritting, council tax queries, information on recycling facilities and information on the effects of bad weather. Unsurprisingly, given the evidence from other communication questions, the most popular form of contact for obtaining answers to FAQs is the telephone. For all 13 FAQs listed in the survey, the proportion of respondents indicating telephone as their preferred contact method ranges from 37%² to 72%.²
- 1.3.13 The internet was also determined to be a popular method for answering FAQs. This method had relevance for 6%² to 13%² of respondents for the across the 13 FAQs considered by the survey.
- 1.3.14 When invited to comment on how they currently receive information about what the council is doing, 75%² stated that they obtained this information from local/national newspapers. A further 25%² stated this information was obtained from leaflets and posters. These are similar findings to those produced by the 2002 survey.

- 1.3.15 When asked to comment on how they would prefer to receive this information about the council, the area of greatest variance between the current source and their stated preference was the web (14%² preference versus 3%¹ using as current method). This suggests some scope for increasing the range of information available via the website.
- 1.3.16 A total of 17%² of respondents considered that they or a member of their household had complained to the council during the last 12 months. This compares with a figure of 19% recorded during the 2002 survey.
- 1.3.17 The main method used by complainants to make a complaint was the telephone (72%)².
- 1.3.18 One in three of the complaints made were connected with specific faults. 23%² had complained about defective roads/lighting, while 10%² had reported a housing fault. Other complaints were to do with poor standards of service (12%)² or the failure to provide a service (18%)².
- 1.3.19 Among the 17%² of respondents that had complained to the council, there was a net dissatisfaction with the way the complaint was handled, the speed of response, the explanation given, and the outcome or result of the complaint. During the 2003 survey, the worst performing aspect was the explanation given for the outcome of the complaint (-23% satisfied). This is likely to link back to some of the earlier issues on communication.
- 1.3.20 Respondents who had complained felt that the service they received could be improved by (all responses ²):
- faster response 23%
 - better service 17%
 - more honesty 7%
 - less “buck passing” 6%.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook its first comprehensive residents' survey in 2000. This involved a combination of focus groups, telephone interviews and a postal survey.
- 2.2 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. In 2002, the full-scale residents' consultation was repeated using a combination of focus groups and a postal survey of residents.
- 2.3 For the 2003 survey, the council decided that it would be inappropriate to carry out full-blown questionnaire surveys with residents and employees. Rather the council wanted to put more emphasis on qualitative work designed to probe specific issues highlighted in the 2002 survey, backed up with limited quantitative research of residents' views.

3.0 TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 3.1 Research was requested to inform Aberdeenshire Council on the issues of:
 - Assisting the council to develop a meaningful and effective multi-channel communications strategy. One outcome of the research would be a means of measuring the effectiveness of this strategy.
 - Identifying the true level of customer complaints, the most common type of complaint and customers' satisfaction with outcomes.
 - Identifying resident's preferred means of accessing council services, and the types of services they would wish to access.

4.0 REPORT STRUCTURE

4.1 The public employee survey team (PEST) has advised TL Dempster Strategy and Research (“TLD”) that it would wish to see the survey report structured in a way that will help the council develop a multi-channel communications strategy.

4.2 With this objective in mind, the report has been laid out as follows:

- 1.0 Executive summary
- 2.0 Background
- 3.0 Terms of reference
- 4.0 Report structure
- 5.0 Research methodology
- 6.0 Findings
- 7.0 Principal conclusions and recommendations

Appendix I - Focus group research supporting information

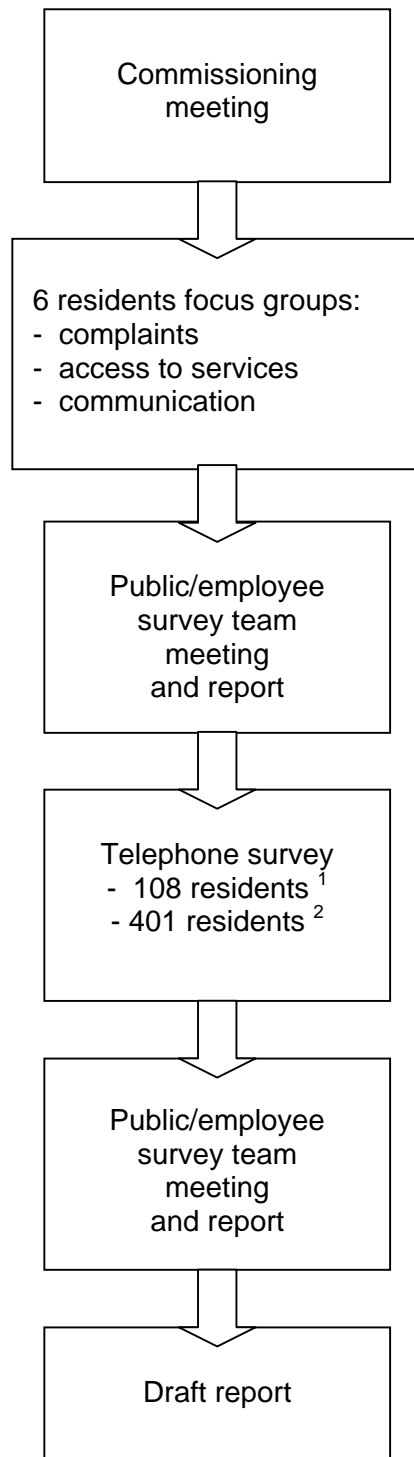
Appendix II – Telephone survey data tables (under separate cover)

4.3 It should be noted, that the body of the report quotes certain statistics compiled from the research. For ease of understanding, each statistic quoted is followed by a ¹ or ², indicating to which component part of the survey they relate. Statistics followed by a ¹ relate to the sub-sample of telephone survey respondents who had communicated with the council in the past 12 months. The sample size for this sub-sample is 108 respondents. The statistics followed by a ² refer to the sample of telephone respondents that comprised those who had not communicated with the council during the past 12 months, plus those that had i.e. sub-sample¹. The sample size of sample ² is 401 respondents.

5.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aberdeenshire council's brief proposed that the 2003 research methodology should comprise focus groups and telephone interviews. The following diagram depicts the approach that TLD undertook to comply with this proposal and to meet the terms of reference set out above.

Research Methodology Diagram



5.1 Focus groups

5.1.1 Six residents' focus groups were held, one in each of the 6 administrative areas. A total of 52 randomly selected residents attended these groups. The demographic profile of those attending is shown in table 1.

Male	Female	Under 45	Over 45	House-owner	Tenant	Minority ethnic residents	Disabled residents
40%	60%	29%	71%	79%	21%	6%	10%

5.1.2 It should be noted that the proportion of disabled and minority ethnic residents attending the focus groups were disproportionate to their numbers in the population. This is in line with the request made by the PEST with reference to these two groups.

5.1.3 In terms of the information produced by the focus group research, it should be noted that this is qualitative in nature. This means that the information generated cannot be statistically extrapolated to the population at large. However, the composition of the groups allowed for a reasonable spread of opinion to be expressed. This means that the opinions put forward by the groups were of value in achieving a better understanding of key multi-channel communication issues that are likely to impact upon the council.

5.1.4 Consistent with the population at large, the focus group members had only limited experience of direct contact with the council. In this regard, the groups were fairly representative of the wider population under study. With regards to complaint-handling specifically, most of the focus group attendees had not complained to the council, and therefore the views expressed tended to be aspirational in relation to the complaints handling process generally, rather than an informed reflection on the current approach of the council. It should be noted however that some of those members of the group that had complained to the council expressed somewhat negative views overall.

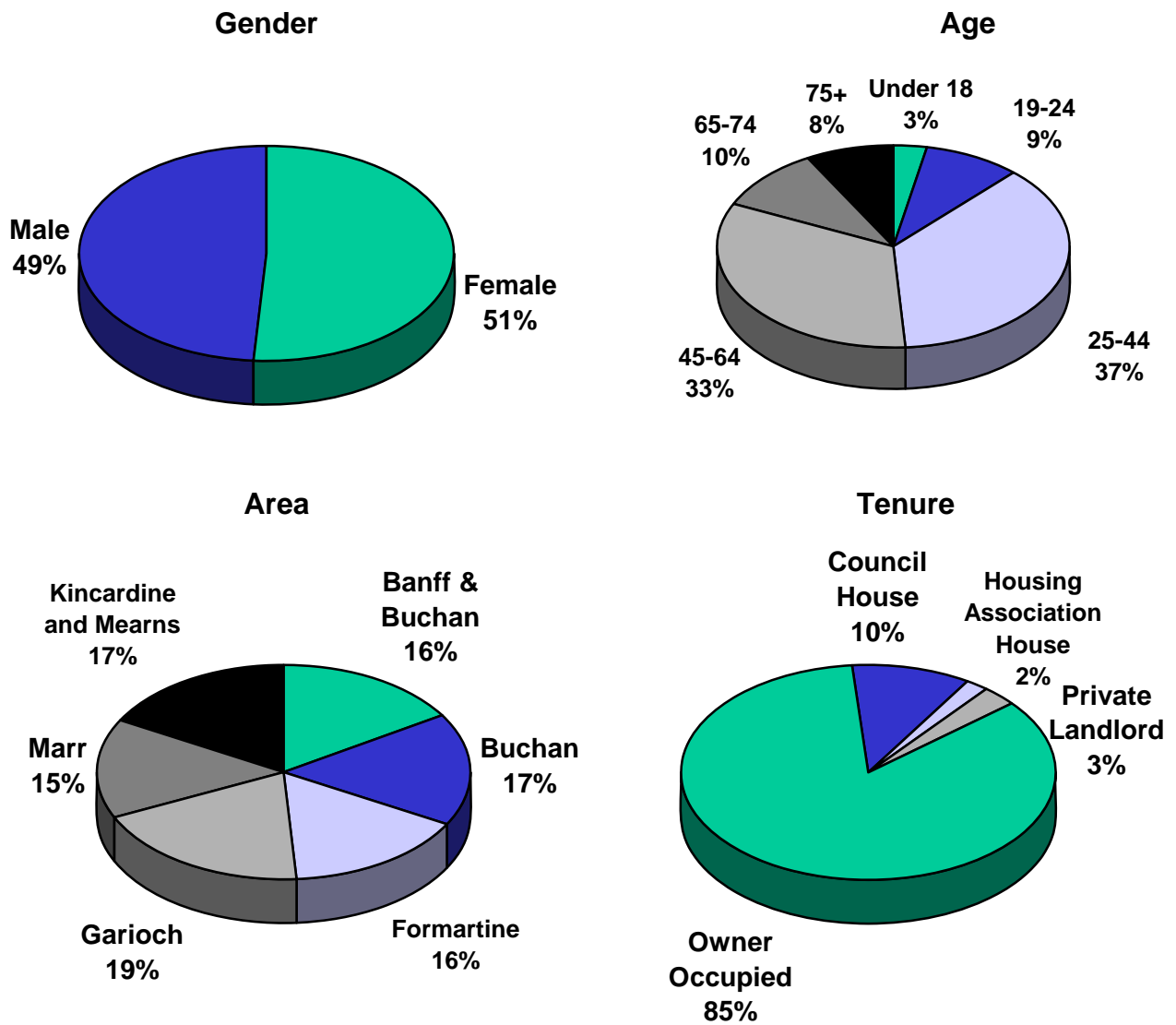
5.2 Telephone survey

5.2.1 For the telephone survey, the survey population was estimated to be 179,000 people. This comprises all adults, aged 16 and over, living within Aberdeenshire (the issue of the number of residents without telephone access is ignored in this calculation). A total of 401 telephone interviews were held with a sample of householders, all of which were randomly drawn from this population. This main sample constitutes approximately 2.2% of the survey population.

5.2.2 A sub-sample of 108 residents (27%) was identified within the main sample of 401. This sub-sample constituted those respondents that had communicated with the council during the past 12 months.

- 5.2.3 To ensure representativeness, the main survey sample was constructed using demographic quotas that were consistent with the information contained in the 2001 census. To further improve representativeness, weightings were applied to specific elements of the survey data during the analysis and reporting stage.
- 5.2.4 The characteristics of the resultant weighted sample are shown in figure 1 p.12). The weighted proportions shown in the pie charts are equivalent to those within the wider Aberdeenshire population. It was not possible to weight the household tenure information in the survey; this was due to the way in which the sample data was collected. Consequently, the survey results are likely to be slightly skewed towards owner occupied households.
- 5.2.5 Using a randomly generated sample, the resultant accuracy in the statistics quoted in this report is $\pm 4.9\%$ for the main survey sample. This is the level of accuracy that applies at the 95% confidence interval. This means that if the telephone survey were repeated 100 times with a different sample each time, in 95 surveys out of 100, the statistics generated would be accurate to within $\pm 4.9\%$ of the actual statistics applying to the population of 179,000.
- 5.2.6 The accuracy level for the sub-sample of 108 residents is 9.4% at the 95% confidence level. This is clearly a reduced level of accuracy relative to the main survey sample and is a reflection of the smaller sample size under consideration.
- 5.2.7 In our opinion, extrapolation of the sample data to the population is reliable within the margins of error quoted above. Reliability has been improved by the use of survey quotas, combined with post survey weightings, and the adoption of a minimum sample size of 400 for the main survey.

Figure 1 – Profile of Respondents - Gender, Age, Area and Tenure



Base: 401
 Weighted figures for gender and age
 Un-weighted figures contained in data tables, Appendix II

- 5.2.8 In later sections of this report, comparisons have been drawn with the 2002 and 2000 council survey results, where possible. Also, information has been compared with the Scottish Household Survey where data permits.
- 5.2.9 When drawing comparisons between survey results, it should be emphasised that the purpose of the 2003 survey was to investigate key issues in depth, whilst the 2002 and 2000 surveys were designed to cover a wide range of subjects. Because the purpose of the 2003 survey was to explore such issues in greater depth, it was necessary to utilise a telephone survey methodology to allow interviewers to probe respondents' replies. Using this method, a total of 401 interviews were achieved. By comparison, the wider remit of the 2002 and 2000 surveys facilitated the application of a postal survey methodology with achieved samples of 3,300 and 2,370 respectively.
- 5.2.10 It is important to emphasise that a random telephone survey (2003 method) is likely to produce a different set of results from a survey that utilises postal methods. This is due to the fact that the telephone sampling method is based on random sampling. Random sampling (and particularly the quota based random sampling that was applied in the 2003 survey) tends to produce survey results that are normally distributed, ie, the results are more likely to be distributed in a manner that is consistent with the overall population within measurable limits. By contrast, postal surveys are not based on random samples (they are self-selecting), and tend to be completed by particular types of individual, who may not be representative of the distribution of views in the population; in many cases, their views are likely to be more extreme.
- 5.2.11 It is also the case that the results of a postal survey cannot be measured in terms of statistical accuracy, and therefore it is not possible to say how representative the achieved sample is relative to the population (unlike a random sample where this can be done). Taking large enough samples can compensate somewhat for this effect, and given that both the 2000 and 2002 survey samples were 5 to 6 times as large as the telephone survey carried out in 2003, the skewing effect described above should be reduced, although it is impossible to say by how much.

6.0 FINDINGS

6.1 Focus group research

- 6.1.1 The 6 focus group attendees (52 people) recognised 6 classes of interaction or communication with the council. These were:
- requesting a service
 - making a booking
 - paying for a service
 - requesting information or applying for something
 - obtaining advice
 - making a complaint.
- 6.1.2 As far as completing these interactions was concerned, focus group attendees felt there was a requirement to cater for all types of access method, ie, telephone, face-face, internet and postal. This was because the different types of interaction with the council were sometimes simple and sometimes complex and in each situation, different methods of contacting applied. It was also noted that timing is a factor in the interaction with the council, and that fast response times would be better suited to methods such as telephone contact and sometimes web-access.
- 6.1.3 In some cases, contact with the council would start by telephone and move to other methods. This may occur because the enquiry starts simple and becomes complex, or because a dialogue starts to become a complaint, and for complaints people preferred to keep written records.
- 6.1.4 Age was also a factor in explaining the focus group attendees' preferred forms of contact, with older people more comfortable with face-face contact and less so with web or e-mail based methods.
- 6.1.5 The ways in which these different contact and communication points perform is obviously important to customer relations. In general the focus group attendees in relation to customer service noted the following standards as important. TLD understands that the council already operates to many of these standards. In general, we feel that the council should seek to ensure that it continues to operate these required levels:
- When contacting by telephone, focus group attendees prefer not to be passed from person to person. Ideally, there should be someone who can say "the buck stops here". Focus group attendees want council employees to have responsibility for taking decisions and to be able to stand by them.
 - Employees should be instructed to give their names at all times (telephone and face to face). Having a named contact makes contact and follow-up easier.
 - Remove any black holes – the council should be proactive in the way it manages enquiries. This includes saying how long the enquiry will take to handle and when a response can be expected.

- It can often be best to link an enquiry to a specific service – focus group attendees are not always sure who this might be. Generally speaking, attendees were not put off by the thought of contacting services directly.
 - In the view of the focus group attendees, the key attributes to be demonstrated by front line employees should include:
 - courtesy and patience
 - empathy
 - a knowledge about who you should be passed on to when dealing with the problem
 - speed of action – get on with the job and call you back
 - a voice on the other side of the phone. If people call they want to speak to a real person – personal touch (computerised call systems are not liked)
 - good telephone manner – put people at ease and reassure
 - use common sense – don't need a lot of training for these things.
- 6.1.6 Most of the above could be considered the implementation of simple, good customer practice measures. In our experience, issues such as empowering front line employees, speeding up response times and having knowledgeable and empathetic employees are common requests made of councils by residents.
- 6.1.7 Delivering this quality of service is difficult because these service level expectations reside at every service point. In addition, the council would seem to be expected to provide a full range of service points because each resident enquiry is felt to be unique. This obviously factors up the demand for delivering good customer service across the board.
- 6.1.8 Focus group attendees were asked to comment on the top ten questions they would want answered at the front line by council staff. This was taken to be an "answer there and then" type of question. This discussion prompted the following types of response. A full list of the replies given by the focus group attendees is shown at Appendix I.
- council tax queries – how calculated? Under and over payments
 - what's happening in bad weather? (school closed/public transport running)
 - information on gritting schedule
 - recycling? (what facilities available locally?).
- 6.1.9 Based on the discussion within the focus groups TLD conclude that the top ten list should also include telephone contact numbers for - emergency council services; key services such as roads, planning and finance; complaints. Referring to the residents survey (figure 5, page 24), the high degree of interest expressed by respondents in a single point of access to council services, may suggest that it would be appropriate to roll this top ten provision into a call handling centre approach.

- 6.1.10 Based on discussions with the focus group, the coverage of this call centre handling approach could be as follows:
- 12 hour operation
 - contact point for telephone numbers of emergency services, and other key council services
 - providers of information from top 10 lists, eg, school holiday dates, gritting provision etc.
- 6.1.11 More research would be required to establish the value of this service relative to the costs of its establishment.
- 6.1.12 Much of the focus group discussions on accessing council services was focused on the methods of contacting the council. In the communications section, these issues were rolled into a wider debate covering:
- how the council should communicate the services it provides (the access issue)
 - how the council communicates its decisions
 - how the council communicates its message.
- 6.1.13 More than half of the focus group attendees felt that the council did not communicate effectively with residents. These concerns related to service awareness, including new service provision, understanding how decisions are arrived at, and knowing whether the council was doing a good job or not.
- 6.1.14 In general, the types of information that focus group attendees felt should be communicated by the council were:
- how to contact council services and councillors
 - what new services are available
 - information about public holidays and any change to services
 - news issues
 - more clear information on decisions affecting planning, roads and schools: specifically, more clarity on how decisions are arrived at
 - how council tax is spent at the local level
 - what are the council's budget priorities.

A number of communication methods were proposed for tackling these issues. In the interest of brevity, these methods are summarised below. A full list of the communication methods listed are contained at Appendix II.

6.1.15 Council services & councillors

As most focus group attendees contacted the council by telephone it was thought that communication with the council could be improved by publishing **a list of council services** ("a sort of A to Z") that showed which numbers to call for different types of service. The booklet already issued with

the council tax (facts and figures) was felt to be helpful up to a point, but did not really help you to communicate with the council.

The groups also felt that the council could make use of more leaflets to explain new services that were being offered.

6.1.16 Council services and the internet

It was thought that the council website could be used for communicating a range of information about services, including contact details and more complex matters, eg, how to apply for planning permission, pay council tax etc. The information provided through the website on winter school closures was thought beneficial and it was recommended that this be retained.

An interesting suggestion was made about the layout of the site, with one attendee asking if it would be possible to type in your post code and obtain a list of local council services and events in you area. This would make the search more specific by area.

TLD understands that a large amount of development work is currently taking place with regard to the council website and that a range of services are already offered. The feedback from the focus groups therefore may indicate a need to more widely promote the potential offered by the website as a communication tool.

6.1.17 Decision making

Communication and handling of planning decisions was not always perceived well by a small number of focus group attendees who had experience of this area. Most of the criticisms raised related in fact to the way that decisions were arrived at and communicated. There was a perception that planning and other key decisions were a "done deal" and that planning officers were not sympathetic to the concerns of the resident. Sometimes, local offices were unclear about how to obtain information relating to planning decisions, which tended to compound the problem.

6.1.18 The council's overall message

A proportion of focus group attendees perceive that the council is bureaucratic and inefficient. This is compounded by the fact that tax levels have risen while services have not improved (perception). There is also a perception that the council's staffing structure does not enable it to make decisions effectively. There is a need therefore for the council to prepare more informative information on "what it has done with the council tax", and how it plans to spend this year's allocation (the facts and figures book doesn't go far enough here). Three ideas were suggested for improving communication in this area:

- Could the council produce a stakeholder report that expands on what it has done with tax-payers money, and what are its plans for the year ahead?
- Could the information that goes out with the council tax be expanded to include commentary on service improvement plans as well as budget numbers? (silly man's guide to the budget).
- Could the council produce a quarterly news-sheet for all households that explained what it has been doing in the course of the quarter, including articles on separate services explaining what they do, how to contact them etc. This could be split into 6 area sections so that local news could be found easily.

6.1.19 Within the focus group attendees, 1 in 3 respondents had experience of complaining to the council. The first item under discussion was defining a complaint. A full set of the definitions provided is shown at Appendix I. In the interest of brevity, an abbreviated set of definitions is shown below.

6.1.20 What is a complaint?

- A number of focus group attendees had experience of bringing to the council's attention a service failure, eg, street-lights not working, unsafe waste disposal, dangerous parking. So long as the service failure was dealt with promptly, this type of communication was not considered to be a complaint. However, if no action was taken, as was the case with the parking issue, then it usually become a complaint in the attendee's mind.
- Sometimes complaints were a function of the seriousness of the issue itself, eg, councillor's use of bad language, claim on behalf of a tenant were serious and immediately fell into the category of a complaint.

6.1.21 Clearly then a complaint is different things to different people, but is associated with the seriousness of the breach (in this case the extent of the service failure), and the time taken to resolve the failure.

6.1.22 The focus group attendees were invited to comment on how they would prefer to make a complaint and what responses they would expect. What was described was a fairly typical escalation process from the initial recording of a complaint through to a more extensive engagement with the council. The stages described for a scenario involving a road repair were:

- Would telephone roads service first - would currently obtain number from phone book.
- Would expect person answering the telephone to be able to action the complaint and/or record it. People at this level would need to be able to do something and make a commitment to you regarding timing etc.
- Would expect call back in 24 hours, and if appropriate, written acknowledgement of complaint in 48 hours (if matter was serious).

6.1.23 The focus group attendees were also asked to comment on good examples of complaint handling and how these might be translated to council practice. Once again, a full list of the suggestions made is given in appendix I, with an abbreviated form shown below. The points made were:

- Compensation - if you've been treated unfairly and your complaint is upheld, you might expect some compensation as well as the service failure to be rectified. This is what food companies and travel companies do.
- Complaint handling of complex matters such as planning needed to be accompanied by clear explanations of how decisions were being arrived at.
- Would expect council to be able to handle complaints about sub-contractor's service, eg, road repairs, school bus service etc. Don't want to be told it's the contractor's fault and passed onto them. Would prefer to keep just one point of contact.
- Would expect help from councillor if situation became very problematic.
- If the council adopted a positive attitude to handling complaints this would help. Thus, complainants should feel that they are being thanked for making a contribution to improving council services.

6.1.24 Tell Us What You Think leaflet

This leaflet was handed round the focus group attendees and the observations made were recorded:

- The greater majority of attendees had never seen the booklet.
- It was suggested that it should be made more widely available, eg, council offices and public libraries.
- There were some comments that it was a little too complaints-oriented.
- The question was asked if the document was held on the internet.
- Was it possible to complain to the council using the internet ie, e-mail.
- Quote - "It only gives numbers for area managers and they are never in".

6.2 Telephone research

6.2.1 The detailed findings of the telephone survey research are set out below. Where possible, comparisons have been drawn with the residents' surveys carried in 2000 and 2002.

6.2.2 In this first section of the telephone survey report, we consider the replies given to council-access questions by the sub-sample of respondents who claim to have contacted the council in the last year. This sub-sample totalled 108 interviews (29% of the total sample of 401 respondents).

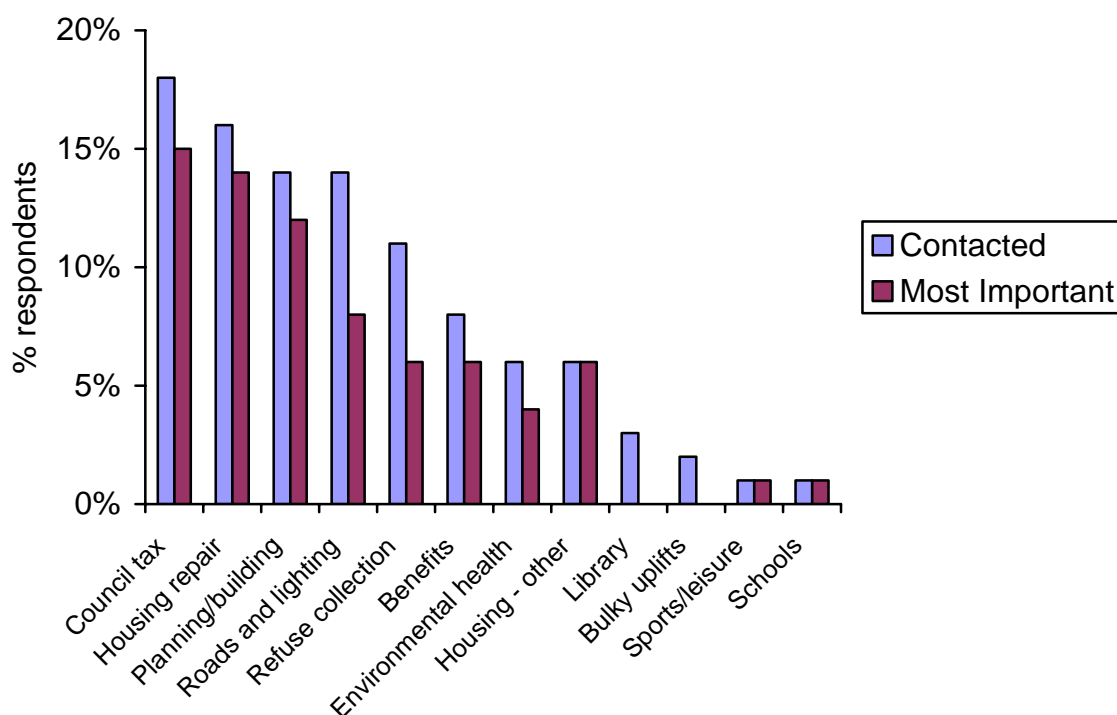
6.2.3 It should be borne in mind when interpreting the following information that the margin of error on a sample of this size is $\pm 9.4\%$ at the 95% confidence level. This compares with a margin of error of $\pm 4.9\%$ on the total sample.

6.2.4 In the context of the margin of error quoted above, the sub-sample data should be treated with care. However, it is felt that the evidence from this group provides some helpful guidance on access issues from the perspective of those respondents who have recently contacted the council, and for this reason, these results are reported separately below.

Contacting the council

6.2.5 When asked the question “which of the following council services have you made contact with over the past 12 months, and which was the most important one” the following answers were obtained from the sub-sample of 29%.

Figure 2 – Q5. “Which council services have you contacted in the past 12 months and if you contacted more than one service, which was the single most important one?” (Base 108)



6.2.6 Figure 2 indicates that amongst those who have made contact with the council in the past 12 months, the most intensely contacted services are those connected with the council tax, housing repairs, planning /building control and roads and lighting. These findings correlate with the focus group research that showed that most contact was made with the finance, planning, housing and roads services.

- 6.2.7 There is a close relationship between the services that the sample had contacted in the past 12 months, and the one service that was considered most important. Once again looking at figure 2, we can see that the most important services contacted by the sample were council tax, housing repairs, planning/building control and roads and lighting. Refuse collection and benefits services were also viewed as being important.
- 6.2.8 Within the survey sample, 44%¹ of council house respondents had contacted the council during the past 12 months. Unsurprisingly, this group principally accessed the housing repairs service, and also saw this as their most important service. By contrast, only 24%¹ of owner-occupier respondents had made contact with the council during the past 12 months. For this group, the 4 main services contacted were council tax, planning/ building control, roads and lighting and refuse collection.
- 6.2.9 Relative to the research objectives under the heading of access to services, these contact experiences and preferences give some indication as to which services users would be most likely to want to access in the future. Based on the “contact” listing information obtained from the survey, these services would be likely to include:

Owner occupied sample

1. Council tax services
2. Planning/building control services
3. Roads and lighting services
4. Refuse collection/cleansing services.

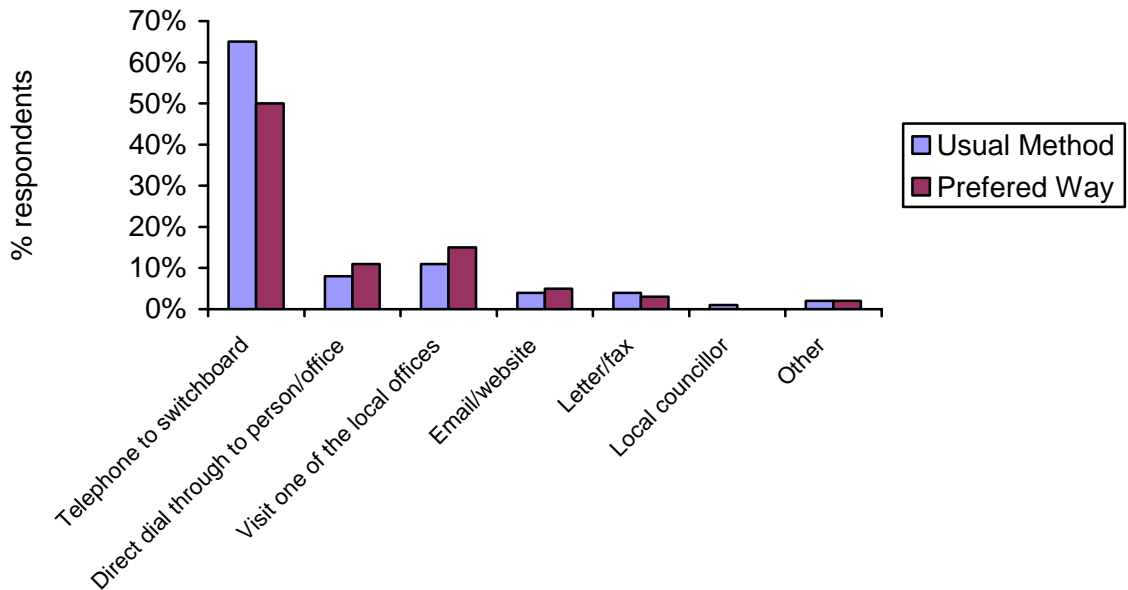
Council house sample

1. Housing repair services
2. Housing benefit services
3. Roads and lighting services

(Excludes an additional 9 respondents in housing association or private rented accommodation).

- 6.2.10 In addition to asking which services the sample had made contact with over the past 12 months, and which was the most important, the survey also sought to identify both the method used to make contact, and the preferred method of contact. Once more, the results for the telephone sample correlate with the findings from the focus groups.
- 6.2.11 Figure 3 (page 22) shows the results from the survey sample that relate to the issue of contact method. This shows that most of the sample usually contacted the council by telephone, and also identified the telephone as their preferred method. The results for access methods shown below are similar to those quoted in the 2000 residents’ survey.

Figure 3 – Q6. “What is the most common method you have actually used to contact the council or get information about council services, and which method would you prefer (to use)?” (Base 108)



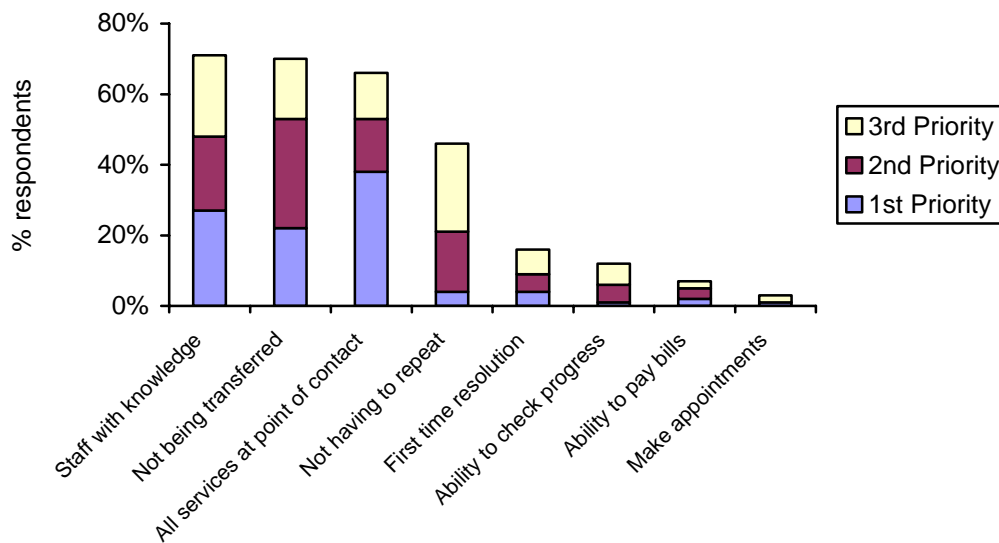
6.2.12 There is a clear and strong preference for telephone contact with the council when obtaining information about council services or contacting the council. These methods are consistent with the focus group findings on this aspect of the survey. This result points to a requirement to have a robust telephone handling service within the council at both switchboard level and at the level of specific services.

Access to council services

6.2.13 We now proceed to consider the access to council issue from the perspective of all respondents to the survey. This sample includes the majority group that had no experience of contacting the council in the past 12 months.

6.2.14 To begin with, telephone contact with the council was explored. The purpose of this section of the survey was to establish respondents' attitudes regarding the most important attributes of telephone contact. Figure 4 (page 23) shows the responses given at this stage of the survey.

Figure 4 – Q10. “If you were contacting the council by telephone, which of the following aspects are most important to you (ranking 1st, 2nd and 3rd priority)? “(Base 401)

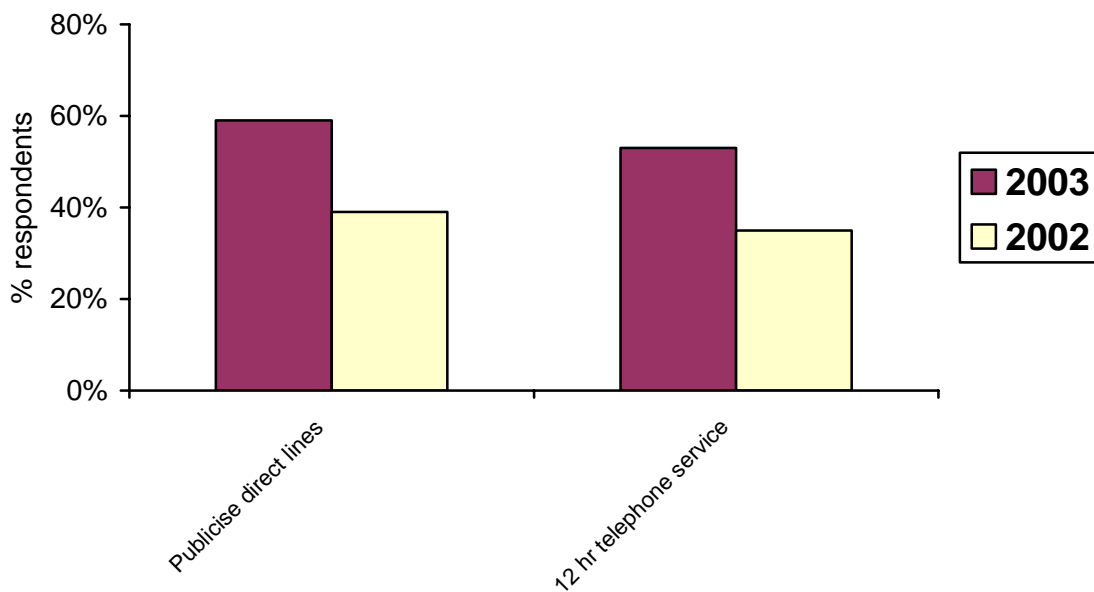


6.2.15 It is evident from figure 4 that respondents’ top 3 priorities (combining the 1st, 2nd and 3rd priorities) are to do with the quality of the telephone experience. Being able to contact council employees “with detailed knowledge of services” is as important as “not being transferred to another location” – ostensibly, these might be viewed as opposite sides of the same “coin”. The third most important overall priority was “all services being available at the point of contact”. In practice, this last point appears to suggest a degree of interest in some kind of call- centre handling approach that can redirect complex enquiries but can also handle, there and then, the more common type of request.

6.2.16 Respondents were also invited to comment on the physical access issues relating to telephone contact. The results of this enquiry are shown in figure 5 (page 24). Included for comparison in this figure are the telephone contact responses from the 2002 survey.

6.2.17 The comparative information appears to indicate an upward movement in the level of interest in specific methods for improving telephone access. This may be accounted for by a genuine shift in demand, but may also be affected by the fact that in 2002 nearly twice as many options were presented to interviewees on this question, which may have caused results to be more evenly spread.

Figure 5 – Q11. “If you were telephoning the council, which of the following would you find particularly helpful? “(Base 401) – 2002 survey. Base 3,330



6.2.18 It seems clear from the 2003 data presented in figure 5 that residents consider the publication of direct line telephone numbers on specific services, plus an extended telephone service (8am to 8pm) as the two most important changes that would make it easier for them to contact the council.

6.2.19 Finally, on the theme of telephone contact, respondents were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about how they dealt with organisations such as the council. Table 2 shows how respondents answered these questions.

Table 2 – Q16. “Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about how you deal with organisations such as the council?” (Base 401)

	Net agreement	Neither/nor
I am happy to deal with a single point telephone contact, as long as they provide a good quality service	93%	2%
I am happy to deal by telephone so long as I get a good quality service	97%	1%
I am happy to deal with any member of staff with a good general knowledge of council services for most routine business with the organisation	93%	2%
My preference is to be able to deal with people in specific service areas rather than generalist employees, even if this costs a bit more or takes longer	61%	14%

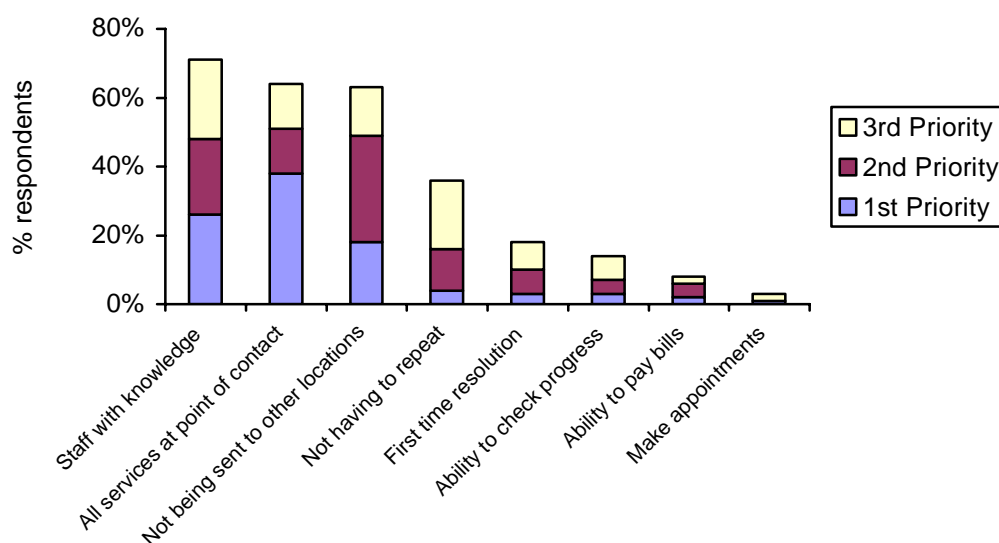
	Net agreement	Neither/nor
I am happy to deal with recorded information systems as long as they are accurate and don't keep me on the phone for too long	-1%	3%

6.2.20 Table 2 reaffirms the view that the quality of telephone contact is crucial to residents' expectations when dealing with the council. It is also clear from this table, that respondents are as happy to deal with "generalist employees" as those in "specific service areas", when telephoning the council. Table 2 also highlights the fact that respondents are not happy to deal with recorded, "push-button" services.

6.2.21 Face to face contact preferences were tested through the survey with all respondents. Once again, this sample includes the majority group that had no experience of contacting the council in the past 12 months.

6.2.22 Figure 6 shows the survey results for the most important criteria for contacting the council in person.

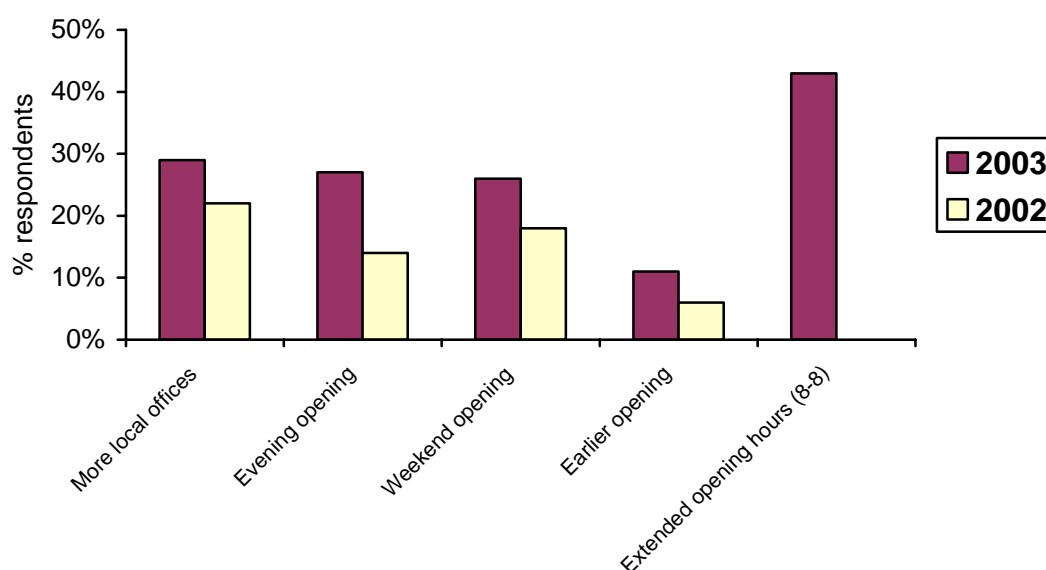
Figure 6 – Q12. "If you were contacting the council in person, which of the following aspects are most important to you (ranking 1st, 2nd and 3rd priority)? "(Base 401)



6.2.23 Consistent with the results for telephone access, respondents express a desire for good quality face-to-face contact when dealing with the council in person. Respondents' key demands are for "employees with detailed knowledge", "all services being available at the point of contact", and "not being sent to other locations". To deliver these attributes, the council needs to utilise competent front-line office employees that have a good level of knowledge of council services, and the capability to deal with a range of issues at the local office level.

6.2.24 As part of the research into contacting the council in person, respondents were asked to state, which physical access features would be of most benefit to them. As can be seen from figure 7, around 1 in 3 respondents in the 2003 survey would find more local offices of benefit, while over 40%² would find some form of extended opening hours helpful. Once again, comparisons-data is presented from the 2002 survey. Note that the response option regarding “extended opening hours” for council offices was not offered in the 2002 survey.

Figure 7 – Q11. “If you were contacting the council in person, which of the following would you find particularly helpful? “(Base 401) (2003 Survey Base 3,330)



6.2.25 Finally, on the theme of face-to-face contact, respondents were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about how they dealt with organisations such as the council. Table 4 shows how respondents answered these questions.

6.2.26 Table 3 (page 27) shows that around 30%² of respondents have a preference (net agreement) for using a local area office when dealing with organisations such as the council. It is interesting to compare this result with responses to the statement “It is important to have face to face contact whenever you are getting in touch with the organisation”, which records a 17%² net agreement rate.

Table 3 – Q16. “Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about how you deal with organisations such as the council? “(Base 401)

	Net agreement	Neither/nor
I prefer going to an office in my local area even if this costs a bit more	31%	11%
I am happy to deal with any member of staff with a good general knowledge of council services for most routine business with the organisation	93%	2%
My preference is to be able to deal with people in specific service areas rather than generalist employees, even if this costs a bit more or takes longer	61%	14%
It is important to have face to face contact whenever you are getting in touch with the organisation	17%	14%
It is important for the organisation to deliver customer services through personal contact and not just technology	75%	9%

Using the website

6.2.27 Respondents were invited during this stage of the survey to record their behaviours and attitudes with regard to contacting the council via its website. Overall, 58%² of respondents said they had personally used the internet in the past three months. This level of use can be analysed as follows (base 401):

- Used from home 35%
- Used from place of work 16%
- Used from school/college 18%
- Used from another public place 3%.

6.2.28 The comparative data from the 2002 residents' survey is shown below. This shows a somewhat different pattern of use of the internet, particularly in relation to “use from home”.

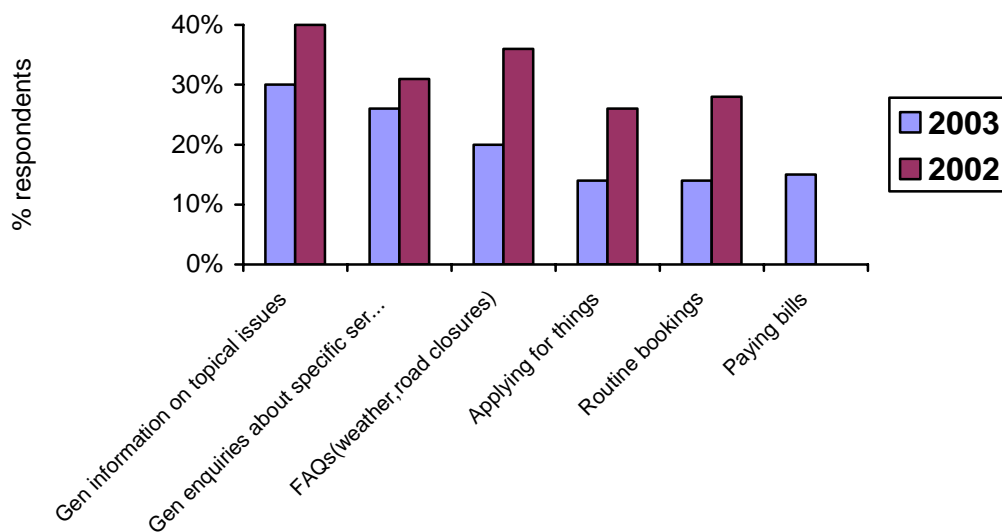
- Used from home 48%
- Used from place of work 26%
- Used from school/college 5%
- Used from another public place 4%.

We have presented below the results of the internet use question that was asked in the Scottish Householders Survey (2001). This shows that 36% of Grampian residents had access to the internet from home (Scottish average 29%). This is more consistent with the 2003 survey results which showed that 35%² of the sample had access to the internet from home, and may indicate that the 2002 sample was skewed towards households with the characteristics of higher than average internet use. This possible

skewing in the 2002 data needs to be kept in mind when reading the following sections on contacting the council via its website.

6.2.29 All respondents were then asked to list the council services they would be interested in accessing online using the council website. The results of this enquiry are illustrated in figure 8. For comparisons, the results of the 2002 residents survey are also presented in figure 8. It should be noted that there is no data for “paying bills” in 2002 because this response option was not offered to interviewees.

Figure 8 – Q15. “If you were contacting the council via its website, which of the following services would you be interested in accessing online? “(Base 401) (2002 survey base 3,330)



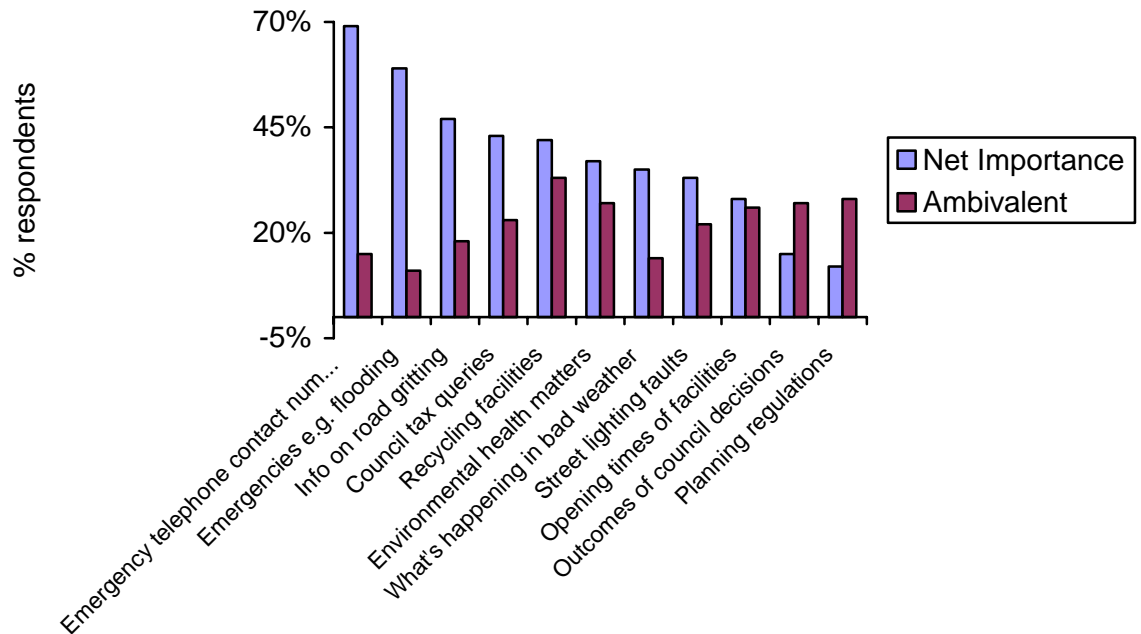
6.2.30 In answering the question set out in figure 10, 69%² of respondents stated they would never contact the council using the internet. Accordingly, 31%² would use the website to contact the council across the range of services shown in the figure. The two most important types of service would be “general, topical information”, eg, road closures, changes to council services, and “specific services information”, eg, council tax payment and adult education opportunities.

6.2.31 Approximately 70% of 45 to 64 year olds and 89% of 65 to 74 year old respondents would never contact the council using the website. This contrasts with the figure of 55% of 18 to 44 year olds who would use the website for contacting the council.

Frequently asked questions

6.2.32 All respondents were invited to rate a series of questions on a scale of very important through to not at all important in the context of the council being able to answer specific questions “there and then”. Respondents were also asked to identify their top 3 priorities from this list of questions. The results for this area of questioning are shown in figure 9 (page 29).

Figure 9 – Q20. “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very important and 5 being not at all important, how important are each of these issues to you? “(Base 401)



6.2.33 Figure 9 shows the net importance to respondents of the issues listed above (net importance is derived by deducting the not at all important responses from the very important responses). It also shows the proportion of respondents who were ambivalent on the issue, ie, those scoring 3, the mid point of the rating scale used for this question.

6.2.34 It is evident from figure 9 that emergency contact information and emergency services access, eg, for burst pipes assistance, are the two most important FAQs that respondents would like to have answered there and then by council employees. It is also evident that on certain matters such as “planning regulations - how to find out about planning regulations” and the “main outcomes of council decisions,” respondent ratings were more ambivalent than important.

6.2.35 Overall, the results for this question were evenly spread across the profile of demographic and housing tenure. Areas of divergence in interest were mainly based on tenure with council house respondents rating “information on council housing allocations” as having a net importance of 14%, and 18% rating their feelings on this issue as ambivalent. And broadly speaking, council house tenants appeared more likely to rate access to emergency support (services and telephone contact) as of greater importance than their owner occupied neighbours.

6.2.36 In addition to rating these FAQs on their level of importance, respondents were invited to state which issues they considered to be their 1st, 2nd and 3rd priorities. Table 4 shows the first 5 issues selected in each category.

Table 4 – Q20. “State which of these issues are most important to you” (Base 401)

Rating	1st Priority	2nd Priority	3rd Priority
First	Council tax queries	Emergency services	Emergency telephone numbers
Second	What’s happening in bad weather	Information on road gritting schedule	Emergency services
Third	Information on road gritting schedule	What’s happening in bad weather	Recycling facilities - what’s available locally
Fourth	Emergency services	Emergency telephone numbers	What’s happening in bad weather
Fifth	Emergency telephone numbers	Street lighting repairs	Street lighting repairs

6.2.37 In thinking about these FAQs, respondents were asked to state which contact method they would like the council to employ when providing them with this information. The observations made here are likely to be of relevance to the wider aspect of accessing council services, and do not only apply to the FAQs. We have set out below the responses given to the questions about accessing FAQs. The range by each method indicates the proportion of the sample that saw this contact method as relevant across all 13 FAQs listed.

- **Single number telephone contact – range 37%² to 72%²**

Is by far the most popular method of obtaining FAQs information. It is particularly relevant to making simple enquiries and for requesting information or advice. Telephone contact was rated as the preferred method for addressing the following types of FAQs:

- emergencies like burst pipes, flooding
- street lighting repairs and fault reporting
- asking about council tax
- obtaining information on what’s happening in bad weather.

- **Via council website – range 6%² to 13%²**

For obtaining static and live information such as details of recycling facilities, dates of council meetings, information on road gritting and opening times of facilities, the council’s website was seen as an appropriate means of accessing the council.

- **Walk into local office - range 3%² to 18%²**

Local offices were favoured most when dealing with enquiries of a more complex nature, eg, council tax queries and finding out about planning issues. Interestingly, in 11 out of 13 FAQs examined, walk-in was deemed to be less important than web based access to information.

- **Information in local paper – range 7%² to 34%²**

Interestingly, local papers were viewed as an important medium for obtaining information on a range of FAQs. The following FAQs were seen as particularly appropriate to communication via local papers:

- dates of council meetings
- opening times of facilities such as rubbish tips
- main outcomes of council decisions.

- **Kiosk/electronic access point – 0%²**

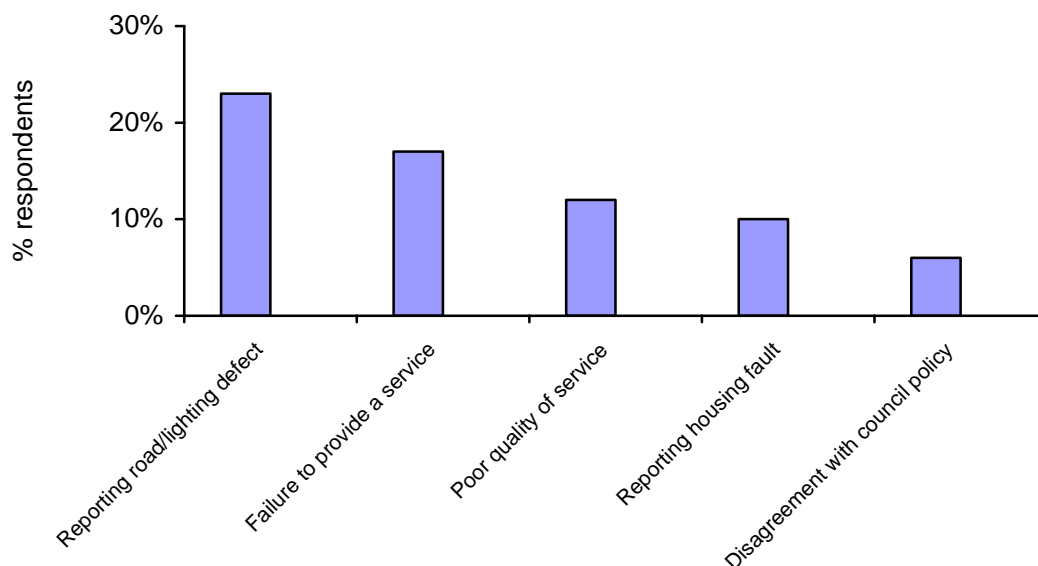
Use of a kiosk/electronic system for obtaining FAQ information was not seen as relevant by any respondent.

Complaint handling

6.2.38 A total of 17%² of respondents (68 people) considered that they or a member of their household had complained to the council about any service it provides in the last 12 months. This compares with a figure of 19% recorded in the 2002 survey.

6.2.39 Within this sub-sample, the nature of the complaint was explored. Figure 10 shows the replies given by respondents in this area. It should be borne in mind that a sub-sample of 68 people is approaching the minimum sample size for a survey dealing with issues of complaint. At the 95% confidence level, the margin of error on a sample of 68 cases is $\pm 12\%$ approximately.

Figure 10 – Q26. “What was the nature of the complaint? (Base 68)



6.2.40 From the information set out in figure 10, it can be seen that the main complaint made by respondents was in connection with reporting a road or street lighting defect. Housing faults (reported by council tenants) were another specific type of complaint made. More than 10% of complaints

were to do with failure to provide a service, or provision of a poor quality service. A total of 7%² of respondents claimed that their complaint was due to a disagreement with the council on its policy.

6.2.41 A total of 31 respondents mentioned a range of other complaints they had made. This list of 32 separate complaints included:

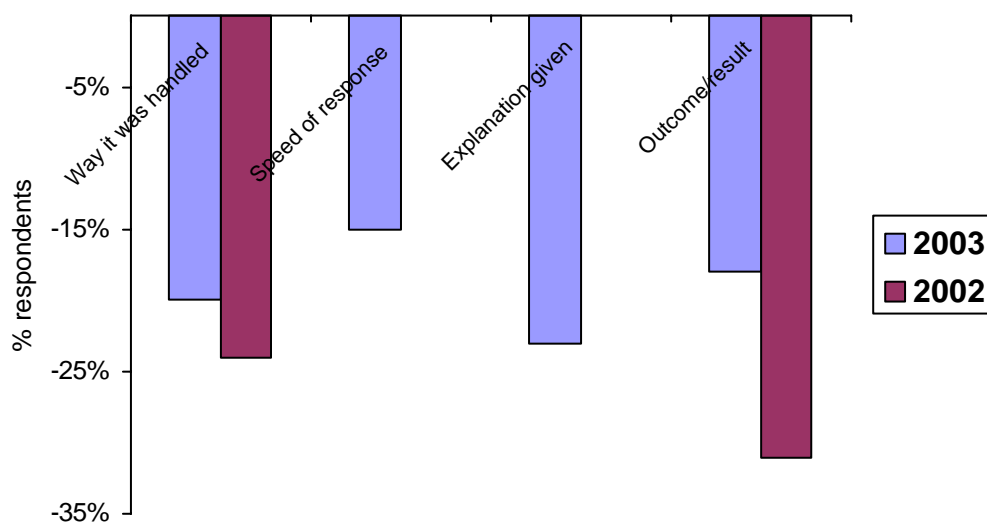
- planning permission complaints
- wheelie bins
- unkempt grassy area next to house
- overflowing sewage
- noise complaint.

6.2.42 In common with other parts of this report, the main method used by respondents to make a complaint was by the telephone (72%²); this compares with a figure of 77% in 2002. This was followed in order of frequency by letter (17%²) and in person (12%²). The extensive use made of the telephone for making complaints underscores the need for the council to ensure that call-handling procedures are working effectively in all services that could be likely to receive a complaint.

6.2.43 The survey also sought to investigate how satisfied respondents had been with aspects of the complaint handling procedure. Figure 11 shows the results of this enquiry. The percentages show that in these four classes of complaint handling, all respondents were in fact “net dissatisfied”, ie, they were more dissatisfied than satisfied.

6.2.44 On a more positive note however, when comparisons are made with the results from 2002, it would appear that on two measures where comparisons can be drawn, there has been an improvement over the period 2002-03.

Figure 11 – Q27. “Overall, how satisfied were you with the following regarding your complaint? (Base 68), 2003 survey base 634.



6.2.45 Respondents that had made a complaint were invited to state how the handling of their case could have been better. The 52 respondents that replied to this question made the following suggestions for improvement:

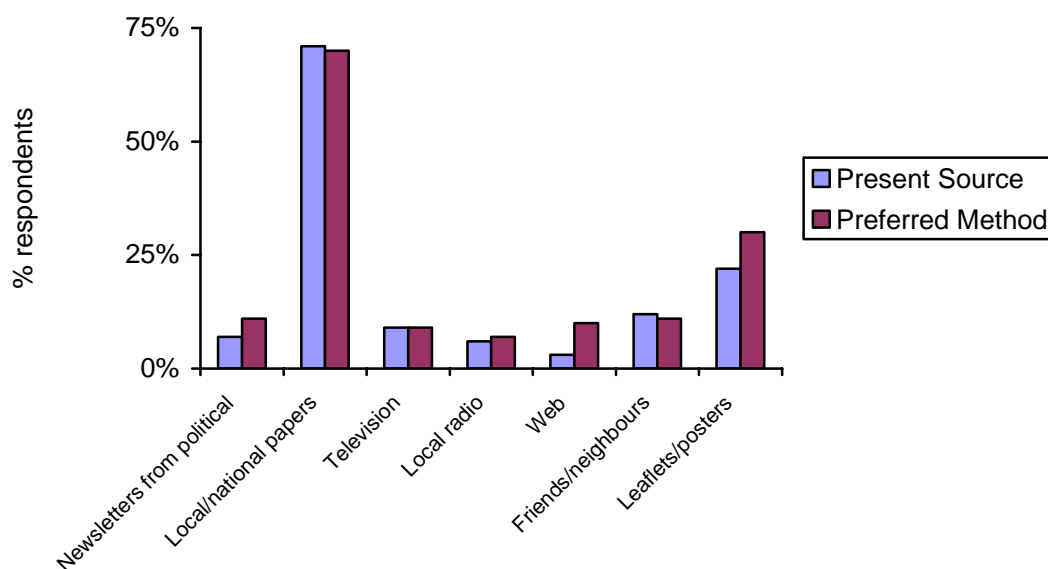
- faster response 23%
- better service 17%
- more honesty 7%
- stop passing problem around 6%

These suggestions reflect complainants' aspirations for a complaint handling service, although it is recognised that council provision is made in these areas already. As noted previously, it should be borne in mind that the base of respondents is small relative to the ability to generalise from this data.

6.2.46 During the survey, all respondents were invited to comment on their preferences relating to (a) how they communicate with the council, and (b) how they would like the council to communicate with the them. Figure 12 shows the responses given to the survey question regarding council communications.

6.2.47 An almost identical question was posed in the 2002 survey, and the information has been included below for reasons of comparisons (figure 13).

Figure 12 – Q18 & 19. “How do you currently receive/ would you like to receive your information about what Aberdeenshire Council is doing and the services it provides (Base 401)



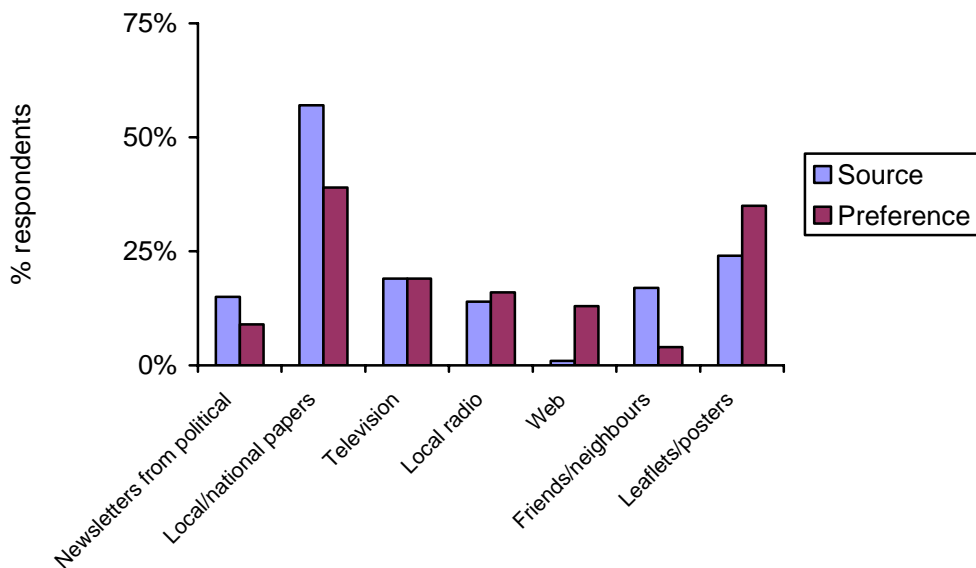
6.2.48 It is evident in the responses given to this question that the respondents have interpreted this question as “how do you obtain/prefer to obtain information about the council and the services it provides”, as opposed to considering how they communicate/prefer to communicate with the council. For ease of presentation, any method (current or preferred) that rates less than 3% has been excluded from the above chart. [For completeness, the

excluded methods are: - council employees, councillors, public meetings, via schools, CAB/voluntary organisations, tenants associations, area committees and community councils].

6.2.49 It can be seen that by far the majority of respondents gain their information about the council from local/national newspapers, followed by leaflets and posters (presumably leaflet campaigns managed by the council?). These two methods also appear to be the preferred methods. Perhaps the main point of note in figure 13 is the response given to web based information, which is the preference of 10%² of respondents, against 3%² who claim to get information through this channel currently.

6.2.50 Figure 13 provides comparative information from the 2002 survey for the question pertaining to sources of information. It is interesting to note that the main methods are very similar between both surveys, and that web communication once again is rated very highly as a preferred method relative to its then level of use.

Figure 13 – Q12 and Q13. “How do you currently receive/ would you like to receive your information about what Aberdeenshire Council is doing and the services it provides? (Base 2002 survey, base 3,300)



7.0 PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.0.1 The consistent theme running through the research brief is one of communication, both from the council to residents and from residents to the council. Investigation of this theme is determined to be the basis of a multi-channel communications strategy.
- 7.0.2 We have presented below our main conclusions and recommendations for the communications strategy with reference to the three communications sub-themes and related objectives set out in the brief. Generally speaking, it is the method of communication that binds these elements of discussion together.
- 7.0.3 In our view, the main elements of a multi-channel communications strategy when applied in the context of the council are:
- the communications methods used and preferred by residents when contacting the council
 - residents' perceptions of how communications methods should perform
 - the council services which receive communications from residents
 - why residents seek to communicate with the council
 - the communication methods used by the council to convey information to residents regarding services and remit.
- 7.0.4 In compiling this section of the report, we have sought to summarise the main conclusions and recommendations in the context of the elements set out above. Note that for ease of discussion we use the term respondent to refer to both the focus group attendees and telephone research samples.

7.1 Conclusions

- 7.1.1 It is clear from the focus group and telephone research that respondents currently communicate with the council in a variety of ways, namely, telephone, face-to-face, internet and letter. The reason for choosing one communication method over another is largely a function of personal preference combined with the nature of the interaction with the council.
- 7.1.2 Although not wishing to over-simplify matters, it would appear that respondents' main concern when they communicate with the council is that the overall experience should be positive. In this regard, respondents have expectations that relate to having clear points of contact, employees who can take responsibility for decisions, efficiency of handling enquiries, as well as receiving a courteous and patient service.
- 7.1.3 An overriding feature of the research then is that respondents' communication issues relate to the quality of the communication and the outcome of the experience. Respondents appear less concerned with the mechanisms *per se* that the council employs to deliver these communication and outcome attributes, than with the existence of the attributes themselves. This suggests that whatever multi-channel communications strategy the council settles upon, the quality of the communication needs to be kept high.

- 7.1.4 It should be stated however, that respondents do expect the council to offer a variety of communication channels to its services. This is because respondents' view the council's service provision not just in terms of their own needs, but also relative to the wider needs of the community. In this context it is difficult to get respondents to think in terms of a trade off between one or other type of communication channel and another.
- 7.1.5 In general, respondents preferred to communicate with the council using the telephone (61%)¹. Telephone was also the most common method respondents actually used when communicating with the council (73%)¹. This preference for telephone communication was recorded within both the focus group research and the telephone survey, and was shared by all age groups under study. Telephone communication was the main method used for contacting general services, obtaining answers to frequently asked questions and making complaints.
- 7.1.6 Respondents preferred when the council took ownership of their telephone enquiry, and gave a clear indication of what would happen to the enquiry if it couldn't be dealt with "there and then" by the person handling the call.
- 7.1.7 From the focus groups research, there was some suggestion that who should be contacted in the council for a given telephone enquiry was not always clear. Most respondents would use the telephone book in the first instance when they wanted to communicate with the council. However, it was not always clear which was the right number to call.
- 7.1.8 Three types of enhanced telephone communication were shown by the research to be worthy of further consideration by the council. These are:
- The publication of direct line telephone numbers on specific services (59% of respondents saw this as likely to improve telephone communication)²
 - Extended telephone service, 8am to 8pm (53% of respondents saw this as likely to improve telephone communication)²
 - A range of basic services being available at the point of contact, ie, a call centre handling approach (73% of respondents saw this as being important to telephone communication)²
- 7.1.9 Communicating with the council through a local office was the preferred method of around 15%¹ of the survey sample. This was a particularly important method for the 65-74 year age bracket (although the size of this sub-sample is small).
- 7.1.10 Around 11%¹ of the sample had actually contacted a local office in the past 12 months.
- 7.1.11 Once again, quality of contact is a key factor in determining residents' satisfaction with their council in this area. The most important communications attributes for office contact were having employees with knowledge (71%)²,

not being transferred to other locations (53%)² and not having to repeat information (36%)².

7.1.12 Interestingly, 43%² of survey respondents saw extended opening hours as something that would be helpful if they were communicating with the council in person. Around 30%² of the sample moreover saw more local offices and more flexible opening hours as being of benefit.

7.1.13 Although residents communicate with the council by letter in situations where the enquiry is complex (or litigious), the third key form of communication with the council is the internet.

7.1.14 Approximately 35%² of the survey sample has access to a computer at home suggesting significant additional scope for growth in internet communications. These access proportions were principally distributed within the 18 to 64 age-break; 93%² of respondents over 65 years of age stated they would be very unlikely to contact the council using the internet.

7.1.15 With regard to the internet, although this type of contact is currently at a low level amongst the sample, it is viewed - by respondents - as having increased scope for take-up. 10%² would prefer to obtain their information about the council in this way, and 5%¹ would prefer to be able to communicate with the council using the internet). Currently, only 4%¹ of the sample had communicated with the council using the internet.

7.1.16 In the research, the development of internet communication was considered from the point of view of the types of questions that respondents felt it would be appropriate to ask of an internet based system. The most highly rated questions suggested by respondents were - providing general information on topical issues (of interest to 30%² of respondents) and answering general enquiries about specific services (of interest to 26%² of respondents).

7.1.17 As part of the overall review of communications, respondents were also invited to rate the top ten frequently asked questions (FAQ) that the council should be in a position to answer "there and then". Based on the research, it would appear that any FAQ system should be able to deliver answers to the following types of request. The contact method preferred by respondents is shown in brackets:

Frequently Asked Questions

- Telephone contact numbers for emergency services (telephone)
- emergency telephone contacts for burst pipes, flooding etc (telephone)
- information on the road gritting schedule (telephone and internet)
- council tax queries (telephone and internet)
- information on recycling facilities (telephone and internet)
- environmental health matters (telephone and internet)
- weather reports (telephone and internet)

- street lighting faults (telephone and internet - reporting)
- opening times of facilities (internet and local media)
- the outcome of council decisions (Internet and local media).

7.1.18 It is clear, given the importance of telephone communication that the majority of FAQs need to be subject to answer using the telephone.

7.1.19 According to the research, the most frequently contacted council services were finance (council tax), planning/building control, roads/lighting, refuse, housing (repair and benefit). In relation to the communication themes discussed above, it may be appropriate to consider how these service areas could be prioritised for any planned change in the approach to communications.

7.1.20 From the telephone research, it would seem that 17%² of respondents consider that they or a member of their household had complained to the council during the last 12 months. This proportion is 2 percentage points lower than seen in the 2002 survey.

7.1.21 It is very difficult to define what a complaint is and therefore the results of the telephone survey, which asked respondents to comment on different types of complaint, should be interpreted in this light. It should also be noted at this stage that many of the focus group attendees whose views are expressed below had never in fact complained to the council.

7.1.22 In the context of the above, the most common type of “complaints” expressed by focus group and telephone respondents were those connected with reporting road or street lighting defects combined with requests for housing repair. Complaints were also seen as being connected with the poor quality of service or failure to provide a service. As noted previously, complaints were chiefly communicated to the council by telephone (72%² of complainants had used the telephone to complain).

7.1.23 Relative to the 2002 survey, complaint handling appears to have improved in the two areas that were subject to comparison - the way the complaint was handled and satisfaction with the outcome of the result. However, overall there was net dissatisfaction in 2003 with both of these aspects, as well as with the speed of response and explanation given.

7.1.24 Our research with residents identified that communication from the council exists at different levels:

- Communication from the council to its residents on the services it provides.
- Communication from the council to its residents on how decisions have been arrived at (including decisions on complaints).
- Communication from the council to its residents on the message of the council (information to demonstrate the council does a good job etc).

7.1.25 Our focus group research in particular, indicated that the following were important communications issues for residents.

- How to contact council services and councillors
- what new services are available
- information about public holidays and any change to services
- news issues
- more clear information on decisions affecting planning, roads and schools
- specifically, more clarity on how decisions are arrived at
- how council tax is spent at the local level
- what are the council's budget priorities?

7.1.26 The focus group discussion revealed that residents had concerns with council communication, and we would therefore propose that the council investigate further ways of more clearly communicating the range of services available, the outcome of decisions and the general message of the council.

7.1.27 In summary, the council's multi-channel communication strategy needs to focus on a number of areas identified above. These areas are:

- Responding to residents' requirements for communicating with the council. As we have discussed, communication methods used are varied but particularly focus on use of the telephone. There is a need to ensure that the quality of this communication method is developed and maintained within the council in the ways described in this report.
- Responding to potential areas for communication development such as the apparent interest expressed by residents in the call centre handling approach.
- Tackling the awareness issues for internet communication, and extending as appropriate the range of services that can be delivered through the Internet would seem to be a priority.
- Examining the scope for new communications tools such as "A-Zs", "stakeholder reports" etc as a means of communicating key council information (services, policies etc) to residents.
- With the caveats expressed previously in mind, addressing the issues raised in this report about complaints handling which seem to focus on the different interpretation of complaints between the council and the general public.

7.1.28 The multi-channel communication strategy discussed above has emphasised the need to have high quality communications methods that ensure residents have a positive experience when communicating with the council. Many of the recommendations proposed in the following section of this report - all of which derive from the residents surveyed - also reflect their per-

ception of what they expect from the council, as well as being a direct comment on their experience.

7.1.29 Residents would appear to seek a range of communication methods from the council - telephone, local offices, internet - and for each, they have clear expectations of service standards. They also request simplifying (A-Z of council contact numbers) and sometimes more extensive communications methods (single point telephone contact and more local offices) which are likely to present challenges for the council.

7.1.30 There are also challenges for the council in conveying its message to residents given that the majority of residents (70%)² have not contacted the council in the past year, and among an element of focus groups attendees, there is a perception that the council is inefficient. In this area of council-to-resident communications there is a need for a more detailed examination of how PR tools can be used to change such opinions about council inefficiency.

7.2 Recommendations

We have set out below the main recommendations arising from this research.

7.2.1 We would recommend that the council pays close attention to the quality of its call-handling procedures for all types of telephone enquiry. These call-handling procedures need to encompass standards for friendliness, helpfulness, knowledge and understanding. From the telephone survey, respondents particularly rated attributes such as employees with knowledge (71%)², not being transferred (70%)² and not having to repeat information (46%)² as important to the quality of the telephone experience. These elements should have standards set that can be monitored as part of the maintenance of high quality call handling.

7.2.2 We would suggest that the council should make limited use (if any) of call queuing systems which adopt the "press button 1,2,3.. options". Both the focus groups and the telephone survey rated these as undesirable features of any telephone contact methods. Much preferred was personal contact with a human operator.

7.2.3 Given respondents' preference for the council to take ownership of enquiries, we would recommend that the organisation examines the scope for increasing the level of employee empowerment for those individuals who handle incoming telephone calls.

7.2.4 Although we are aware that telephone numbers already exist in the telephone directory, we would recommend that the council considers publishing an "A-Z" list of council service areas, and contact numbers, perhaps listed by life event or simple, subject heading. These documents could be issued to every household once per year with the council tax information. It would probably also be relevant to consider producing this document electronically on the council website.

7.2.5 We would suggest that the council investigates further the potential interest in the call-centre handling approach. As noted previously, 73% of respondents felt that such an approach would improve the quality of their communication with the council. There are clearly many issues to consider with respect to adopting such an approach. Some of the content matters arising from the research are considered below:

- While respondents saw the call-centre handling approach as relevant to handling simple enquiries, it may also be appropriate to consider whether this call-centre approach could be used to log more complex enquiries, eg, planning applications that could be passed onto the relevant service for subsequent action.
- Also, the call-centre handling approach may allow the council to explore how far services such as logging complaints, or answering frequently asked questions could be channelled through this centre. The issue for the council here is the remit of such a centre, and how best to communicate what it does (as distinct from what other contact points within the council can achieve). We would suggest therefore that the council may wish to consider carrying out further research into the call-centre handling approach.

7.2.6 Based on the results from the telephone survey, there may be a case for the council to review its policy on opening hours for local offices.

7.2.7 We would also suggest that the council investigates how it could promote use the internet to provide a route into providing general information on topical issues (of interest to 30%² of respondents) and answering general enquiries about specific services (of interest to 26%² of respondents).

7.2.8 Once again, we would recommend using additional research - perhaps an online based survey - to flesh out the content of these two areas of the site, and subsequently test user reaction to their use. This would allow the council to respond to the latent demand for web based delivery of council services in a controlled way, ie, by responding to the two main preferences expressed by the residents' research.

7.2.9 It is worth emphasising at this stage that a number of other internet enquiry and transactional components were of interest to the respondents to this survey (see figure 8, page 28). These components should be considered as possible follow on work to the initial testing of the two components set out above.

7.2.10 A number of FAQs are "live" questions, and these could also be incorporated into the website. Again it may be appropriate to consider testing the online FAQs at the time of evaluating users reaction to the other new services that we suggest be brought online.

7.2.11 From the focus groups and telephone research, two areas were highlighted as having potential for improvement in the complaints handling process.

7.2.12 The first area is responding to complaints, where it was felt that times for handling and responding to enquiries could be reduced. For example, it may be possible here for the council to measure the time taken to respond to complaints, and to set standards (which it may publish) for addressing such matters in the future.

7.2.13 The second area is the explanation given for the outcome of a complaint. Once again, the council may wish to consider how it presents its findings for any complaint so that complainants are clear on the process and can understand the logic of the explanation given.

7.2.14 We would suggest that the *Tell Us What You Think* leaflet is marketed more widely so that residents are aware of its existence (although it must be remembered that most complaints come through the telephone, rather than being submitted in writing).

7.2.15 Finally, complainants would like empowerment of employees at a local level so that certain minor “complaints” could be addressed without going through the wider council. This may suggest a review of the complaints recently handled to identify those categories of complaint that can be subject to handling by a local member of staff, so that in future, local guidelines can be set for handling such complaints.

7.2.16 Below we make a number of recommendations based on the research for improving the council-residents communications process. These are areas that the council may wish to consider as new forms of communication:

- Publish a stakeholder report.
- Expand the information that is issued with the council tax to include commentary on service improvement plans as well as just budget numbers.
- Publish a quarterly news-sheet for all households that explains what the council has been doing in the course of the quarter, including articles on separate services explaining what they do, how to contact them etc. This publication could be split into 6 area sections so that local news could be found easily.
- Publish an A-Z of council services showing contact numbers (annual) – already discussed

7.2.17 The above suggestions for hard copy publication also need to be assessed for their suitability as internet tools. Leaflets could also be used as a way of communicating messages about service changes, eg, due to holidays, new services being introduced, etc.

7.2.18 It should be noted that much of the above is in line with the government’s public performance reporting requirement (PPR).