

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL

2004 RESIDENTS SURVEY

OVERVIEW REPORT

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A considerable improvement in residents' perceived satisfaction with the Council (as measured by its net satisfaction rating) and an improved perception of the Council compared to other Local Authorities.

A closing of the gap in perceived satisfaction between those areas closest to Aberdeen and those areas furthest away.

Modest improvement in relation to contact management but continued concerns over complaint handling.

Improved perceptions of the environment of towns and villages whilst concerns remain over a perceived lack of community facilities especially for young people.

Concerns regarding the implementation of Council Planning policies and, in particular, worries over a lack of affordable housing.

Support in principle for traffic calming measures but concerns over consultation prior to implementation.

Continued high level of satisfaction with key services such as schools, libraries, parks and open spaces and leisure facilities.

Many other services perceived to be improving, including refuse collection, street lighting and street cleaning.

Generally improved perceptions of roads and transportation. Roads maintenance and winter gritting/snow clearing continue to be rated negatively but improvements in perception are apparent.

Internet access is now 60%, but there is a lack of awareness and understanding of the potential role of the Council web site.

Improved perceptions of the Council in relation to issues of environmental and social responsibility accompanied by signs of improved environmental awareness and social responsibility among the general population.

Continued concern regarding the quality of Council communications and public engagement generally.

Nine interim recommendations have been set out covering:

- (i) Developing local affinity with the Council.
- (ii) Complaint handling.
- (iii) A review of community facilities.
- (iv) Investigation of reasons for concern on Planning issues.
- (v) Affordable housing.
- (vi) Prioritisation of resources towards road maintenance.
- (vii) Encouragement of traffic calming schemes.
- (viii) Encouraging environmental awareness and social responsibility.
- (ix) The Council's corporate communications strategy.

These interim recommendations are presented for further discussion with the Council and its Senior Management Team.

1.0 BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This 2004 Residents survey is the third full-scale survey of residents' views which Aberdeenshire Council has undertaken since 2000 (such surveys have been undertaken in 2000, 2002 and 2004). Specific in-depth items of research have also been conducted in the intervening years (2001, 2003). The survey repeats a number of questions from the 2002 survey, to allow for a tracking of changes in perceptions over time. In some cases, it has been possible to track changes back to the 2000 survey. However, as the survey questionnaire was considerably revised and updated in 2002, this has not usually been possible.

In addition, a series of six exploratory focus groups were held in the spring of 2004.

OBJECTIVES

- 1.2 The original broad aims and objectives of the 2004 Residents' Survey were to:
- Identify new issues of importance to Aberdeenshire residents.
 - Determine the Council's performance as perceived by residents.
 - Determine the Council's performance relative to residents' priorities.
 - Ask some of the same questions from the 2000 and 2002 Residents' Surveys to allow comparisons to be made (see above).
 - Ask some of the same questions as in the Employee Survey.
 - Benchmark the Council's performance against other Councils/organisations.
 - Identify priorities for improvement, so that goals can be set for future improvement.
 - Provide a measurement of public satisfaction.
- 1.3 The programme of focus groups was used to help translate these broad objectives into a number of specific issues which the main quantitative survey had to address. A summary of the focus group findings is set out in Chapter 2. This process was also aided by a review of the content of previous questionnaires.

This resulted in a survey questionnaire covering the following headings:

- Overall Satisfaction

- Customer Service and Contact Management
- The Communities of Aberdeenshire
- Roads and Transportation
- Satisfaction with Key Services
- The Internet
- Social responsibility
- Council Decision Making

Separate chapters are included in the report for each of these themes (chapters 3 to 10).

- 1.4 The purpose of the survey is to inform a variety of planning and decision making processes within the Council; the results are therefore of more than academic interest. Throughout the research process, the involvement of the Public and Employee Survey Team (PEST) has been crucial in ensuring the relevance of the survey to these decision making processes. Clearly, it is also important that the results be widely and effectively disseminated throughout the organisation.

The focus is one of continuous improvement. The survey is designed to identify areas of priority for residents and to gauge their views on the Council's current performance in these areas and how such performance could be improved.

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 actual experience of the service and also from wider communications including word of mouth. Satisfaction with particular aspects of Council service is 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.

As a minimum, the results should be considered by the full Council and also by the Senior Management Team as a group. Individual Services must consider the implications for their own Service, as should established groups who are working on "cross-cutting" issues such as the Customer Service Project Team. More generally, mechanisms for widespread dissemination of the survey results should be chosen, involving for example, articles in Accent, a Core Brief item and appropriate local press coverage.

METHODOLOGY

- 1.5 The focus groups were the first element of the whole survey process. Six groups were held, with recruits split evenly by sex and under/over 45s. Twelve people were recruited to each group, to achieve a target attendance of 6-8 participants. At least four people from each group were recruited from the rural areas surrounding the town in which the venue was located. The programme of groups was as follows:

Monday 21 st June	Alford	13 attendees
Monday 21 st June	Ellon	9 attendees
Tuesday 22 nd June	Fraserburgh	7 attendees
Tuesday 22 nd June	Laurencekirk	8 attendees
Tuesday 22 nd June	Westhill	12 attendees
Wednesday 23 rd June	Peterhead	7 attendees.

The Topic Guide used for the focus groups is illustrated as Appendix 1.

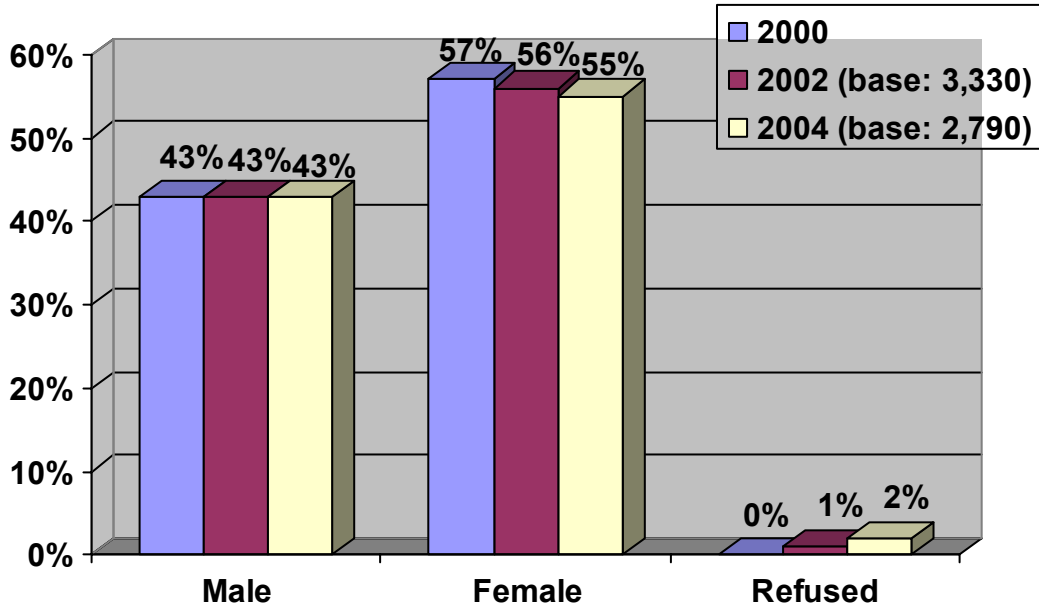
- 1.6 The survey questionnaire (included as Appendix 2 under separate cover) was devised in partnership with PEST. It builds on questions asked in previous surveys whilst also taking account of the issues raised in the exploratory focus groups as well as inputs from various Services within the Council, seeking to gauge public opinion on a variety of issues.
- 1.7 The survey was conducted on a postal basis, with a total of 12,500 invitations being issued, at random, to households in Aberdeenshire, selected to be representative of the population in the Council's six administrative areas. This approach varies somewhat from previous practice within the Council for this form of survey, where a combination of a postal and telephone survey was undertaken.

RESPONSE

- 1.8 A total of 2,790 responses were received (including 20 responses which were completed online). This represents a response rate of 22.3%. This is within the anticipated range of response rates for surveys of this nature and compares favourably with the 18.9% response rate for the postal component of the 2002 survey.
- 1.9 It is important to consider the profile of the achieved sample in considering the comparability of the 2004 data to the 2002 figures.

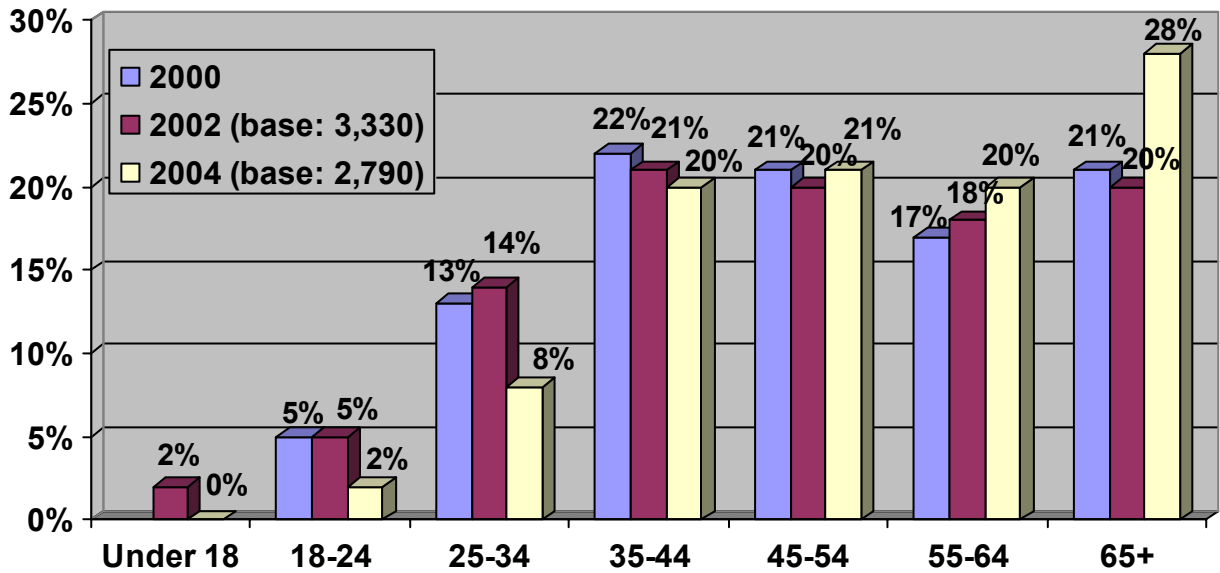
Figure 1.1 over the page illustrates that the gender mix is almost exactly the same as for the 2002 survey (which was, in turn, similar to the 2000 survey). It should be noted that, throughout the report, numbers may not add to 100% due to the effects of rounding.

Figure 1.1: Profile of Respondents (Gender)



1.10 Figure 1.2 does, however, illustrate that the age profile of the 2004 survey respondents is slightly older than was the case in 2002.

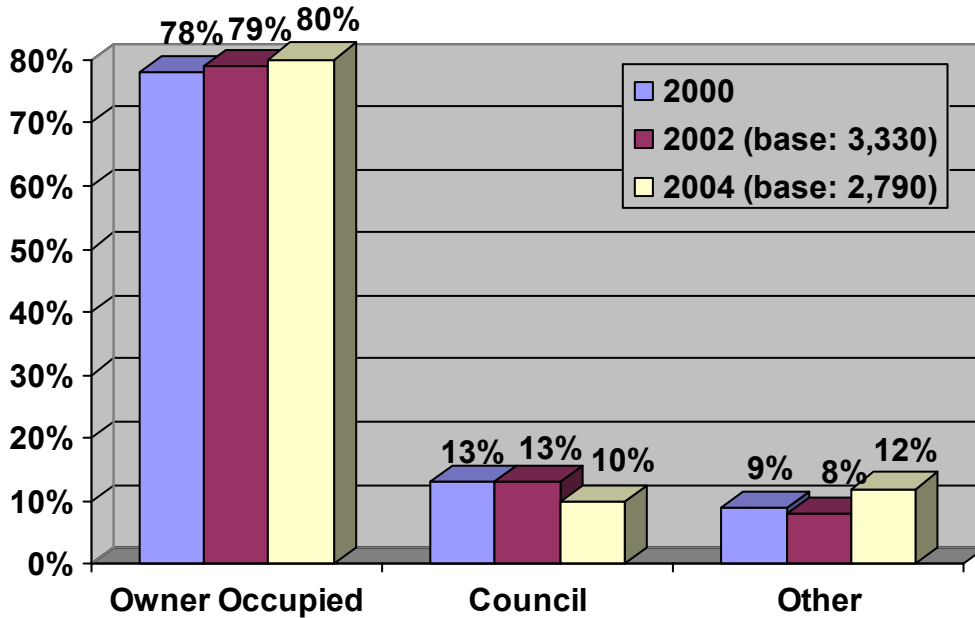
Figure 1.2: Profile of Respondents (Age)



This slight age skew does not impact materially on the comparability of data over time.

1.11 The profile of respondents in terms of housing tenure has changed little, although there are fewer Council housing tenants and slightly more in the “other” category which includes Housing association tenants.

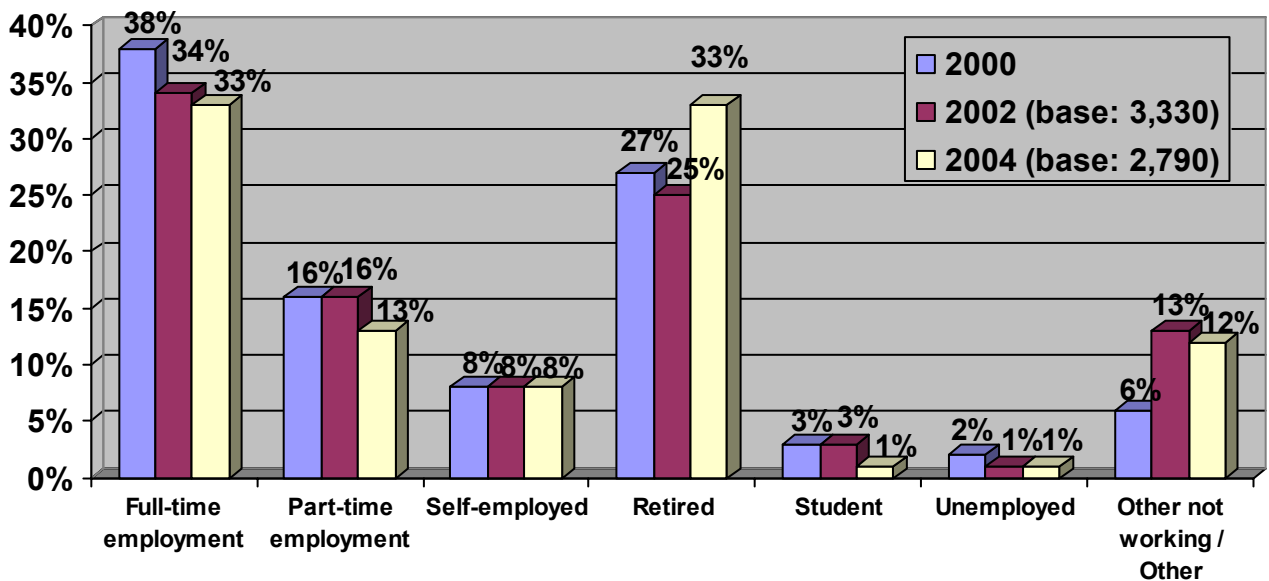
Figure 1.3: Profile of Respondents (Housing Tenure)



The 2004 profile is actually slightly more representative of the actual housing stock profile within Aberdeenshire.

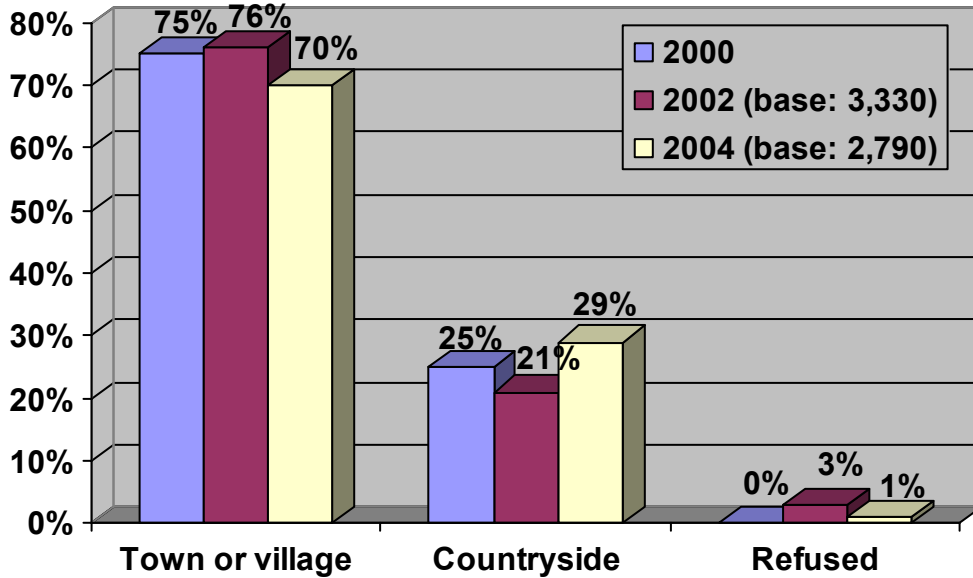
1.12 The respondent profile by employment status reflects the higher proportion of retired respondents, but is otherwise little changed.

Figure 1.4: Profile of Respondents (Employment Status)



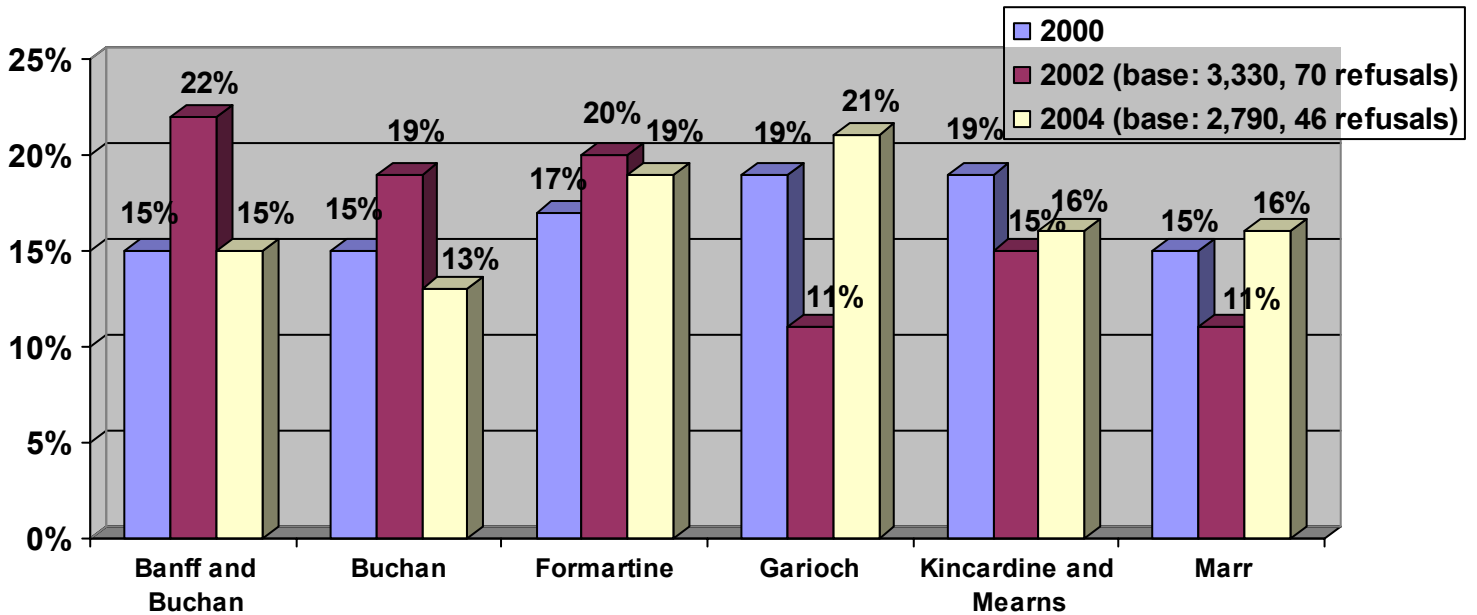
1.13 2004 respondents are slightly less likely to come from towns or villages and slightly more likely to be “countryside” based. Again, this distinction does not impact materially in the comparability of results.

Figure 1.5: Profile of Respondents (Rurality)



1.14 Figure 1.6 illustrates the profile of respondents by area for both the 2002 and 2004 surveys. It illustrates significant changes and variable levels of response from each area. In part, the 2002 figures may have been affected with the problems encountered in the survey mail-out which are alluded to in the 2002 report.

Figure 1.6: Profile of Respondents (Area)



The sample sizes are sufficiently robust to allow for an analysis of the views of people living in each area and such a breakdown is incorporated in the detailed data tables.

- 1.15 In the 2002 survey, the data was weighted to ensure representativeness by area. Thus, as Garioch was under-represented, the responses from that area were weighted to ensure that they represented Garioch's actual share of the population. This process has been replicated for the 2004 survey (in this case, the response rate from Garioch was relatively high, so results from that area have been weighted downwards).
- 1.16 Appendix 3 (under separate cover) incorporates a detailed analysis of the survey results by gender, age, tenure, employment status and location. Where variations according to such criteria are of particular significance, they are noted in the analysis which follows.

2.0 EXPLORATORY FOCUS GROUPS

2.1 The issues which are seen as being “most important” continue to be primarily highly visible services, particularly universal services. The main (unprompted) examples were:

- Roads maintenance
- Winter road clearing and gritting
- Traffic calming
- Waste management (this was more likely to be phrased as “recycling” than in previous studies)
- A number of issues around the broader issue of the environment of towns and villages (including littering, grass cutting and street lighting)
- Planning issues
- Dealing with the Council’s Finance service.

2.2 Other issues which arose unprompted as being important in this discussion were of interest to specific segments of the community:

- Schools
- Social work services (particularly care of the elderly)
- Facilities for young people.

2.3 To some extent the “most important” issues were seen as such for the very reason that they were clearly identifiable as services for which the Council had responsibility. It was also the case that opportunities to improve these services were apparent. This was certainly the case in relation to the universal services noted above, for social work services and facilities for young people. Schools, however, were perceived much more positively.

2.4 Comparatively few residents reported any significant dealings with Aberdeenshire Finance, with Council Tax being debited automatically from their bank accounts. This was seen as a good thing – they did not particularly want to have contact with the Finance Department. The number of ways to pay and reminders etc. were all seen as examples of sound administration.

Two broader issues became apparent, however. Firstly, concerns over the level of the Council Tax, and Council Tax increases, have become more apparent. Secondly, a number of the groups expressed the view that a high level of defaulting meant that they had to bear a greater share of the burden.

- 2.5 People were fairly well aware of the range of services they could expect in relation to sheltered housing, day care provision and support for people in the home. Most of the members of the public were generally satisfied with the provision on offer. Concerns were raised about a lack of capacity in the Laurencekirk group, but this was driven by a “professional” working in the field.
- 2.6 This issue was not raised at all in the initial discussions. Quite a few group participants had some experience of seeking help from the Council, mainly whilst starting up a business. Some negative comment was made in comparison to the neighbouring authority in Angus, but this should not be overstated.
- 2.7 A perceived lack of affordable housing was a much more apparent issue than noted in previous focus groups. “Incomers” were often seen as having driven up property prices at the expense of local people. In other circumstances, people starting a family were not able to access social housing in their town or village and found themselves decanted to another area. There was some perception of a mis-match between needs, and available stock, with a lack of properties suitable for single people or single parent families.
- 2.8 In relation to Council housing some tenants perceived the quality of overall service to have dipped in recent years, focusing primarily on the perceived slowness of day to day repairs. This said, the emergency repairs service was seen as being very good.
- 2.9 Landscaping around towns and villages was quite a concern for the groups. This did not relate to parks, which were generally rated favourably, but to open spaces and hedgings etc. within towns and villages. In part, this was a concern about aesthetics in terms of the look of villages; some signs of improvement were commented on in this regard. In other cases, the issue was one of maintenance of road sides and roundabouts, which some participants felt was worsening and was causing dangerous situations.
- 2.10 In the larger towns, there was a general degree of satisfaction with the availability of leisure and recreation services. However, this did not extend to people living in the more rural areas, who not only felt themselves to be disadvantaged, but commented on the lack of affordable transport to allow them to use the facilities elsewhere.

A particular issue continues to be the perceived lack of facilities for young people, which manifests itself in some areas in a community safety concern, with young people congregating in shopping centres etc. in a way which is seen as intimidating to older residents.

- 2.11 Libraries are viewed as a valuable community resource and continue to be seen in almost universally favourable terms. Quality of personal service and responsiveness is seen to be excellent. People were very positive about the range of non-book options now available. Only (very) minor concerns were about the availability of some items and the size of facility (in Westhill).
- 2.12 Lifelong learning was not recognised as a particularly important issue, but was generally perceived favourably due to the wide range of opportunities seen to be on offer in different localities.
- 2.13 Planning issues are a very important concern within all of the groups. A key requirement is perceived fairness, but a number of participants felt that the Council gave more weight to the views of developers than of local communities.

In particular, there was a widespread perception that Planning was not “joined up” in that services were not made available to cope with large scale housing developments (ranging from water and sewerage services to local shopping amenities and other facilities). Overall, this issue was much more apparent than in previous focus groups.

- 2.14 This continues to be an area of concern for members of the public, although their concerns extend beyond roads maintenance per se. For example, issues raised, included: certain roads needing to be upgraded to dual carriageway, “roads architecture” such as junctions and corners being perceived to be unsafe, winter gritting/snow clearing and roadside landscape maintenance. This was in addition to issues of the maintenance of road surfaces, where participants had complaints about repairs not being done and about short term “patching up” solutions being adopted, which they felt was wasteful over the longer term.

In some areas, notably Westhill, the issue of road safety was a particular concern due to speeding drivers.

- 2.15 Awareness of the respective roles of the Council and BEAR have, in one sense, improved in that people understand that BEAR is responsible for the trunk roads. However, a number of respondents felt that they had been sub-contracted to do so by Aberdeenshire Council.
- 2.16 Schools were seen as extremely important, but only to those with children at school, who saw themselves as being directly affected. Across the community, there is a sense of pride in the quality of education provided within Aberdeenshire.

Some modest concerns were noted, however, in relation to issues such as equipment shortages, difficulties in recruiting teachers and the behaviour of some school children at break times and lunch breaks.

- 2.17 The environment of towns and villages remains an important issue for Aberdeenshire people. In many respects, improvements in the overall maintenance of towns and villages became apparent in the groups. The Council was more often than not seen as doing its bit in terms of picking up the litter and maintaining the streets. The problems which remained were matters of personal responsibility; people wanted to see stronger action taken against people littering the streets.

Respondents noted that some of the improvements had come about due to the local community's own efforts; they saw this as a positive thing.

- 2.18 Traffic calming is much further up people's agenda now than it was two years ago, when similar groups were last undertaken. Exceptionally polarised points of view were evident and the group discussions highlighted the complexity of implementing traffic calming solutions which would meet the needs of the majority.

In some areas (e.g. Fraserburgh and Laurencekirk) the view was that much more needed to be done in terms of traffic calming and that the Council was "all talk and no action". In other areas (e.g. Ellon) respondents complained that traffic calming was noisy, damaged their cars and was dangerous as it was ignored by some motorists. In the latter case, participants did not see a road safety case for traffic calming. These contradictory viewpoints highlight the need for detailed consultation and communications in the implementation of such schemes.

Some areas of consensus were evident, however. For example, restricted speed limits near schools, and signs which warn the driver that he/she is speeding were viewed positively.

- 2.19 Understanding of the Council's role in terms of transportation was fairly limited within the groups. People's concerns were mainly about the "big issues" of public transport availability.

Some concerns were noted about the availability of transportation services in rural areas to allow members of the public to partake of services in the larger towns. Buses were seen as costly and infrequent in most areas. There was little awareness of community transport options.

Questions were also raised as to why members of the public could no longer use school transport.

- 2.20 The core aspects of the Council's waste management service were perceived very positively, particularly the bulk uplifts (despite some limited communications problems).

Where improvement priorities were noted, they were often about enhancing recycling activity, as noted below.

- 2.21 Respondents were asked about their awareness of a number of Council campaigns and what they thought of these campaigns.

Firstly, people had very limited knowledge of the "Fair Share" campaign. Although their awareness that much of the Council's funding was channelled through Central Government, they were unsure as to whether Aberdeenshire received a higher or lower share of per capita funding. Some thought it must have been higher due to the rural nature of much of the Council area.

When described to them, people were very positive about the idea of the campaign.

- 2.22 In relation to the "Step Change" travel behaviour change initiative in Inverurie, there was little knowledge of the campaign in any of the groups. There was scepticism about its likely effectiveness as people maintained that the real problems were about a lack of public transport capacity and the need for a motor car. Some respondents commented on car journeys being "cheaper" than public transport.

- 2.23 An awareness of recycling, and a desire to do so, were apparent within most of the groups. People were aware of the recently published waste management booklet and, whilst they felt it was well-produced, some were critical of its perceived cost (and questioned its re-cyclability).

There was some feeling that the Council could do much more to encourage recycling at the point of disposal. For example, a number of participants cited examples from elsewhere of different coloured bins being used for the separation of different recyclable materials. Some criticism was made of the breadth of coverage of existing recycling facilities (e.g. a lack of facility to recycle plastics was sometimes seen as an omission).

- 2.24 In some of the groups there was a sense that the Council's strategic communications could be improved. Participants felt they did not have good enough information, not only about the Council's performance, but of key issues such as who their councillor was, how to make a complaint and so on. This said, there was also a view that any communications needed to be proportionate. The groups did not want to see scarce resources diverted into expensive publications which would not be read. Their preference would be for concise, simple information to allow them to access further information, with the latter being accessed from public buildings, libraries or the web.
- 2.25 In relation to the perceived accessibility of services, a key point to note is the apparent disassociation which people feel from Aberdeenshire Council, at least in comparison to previous, more decentralised, manifestations of local government. People saw this as manifesting itself in a loss of community spirit. A strong preference emerged for services, where practical, to be delivered (or at least accessed) at a local level. It was not always perceived that this was the case currently.

Some specific issues of accessibility were noted, although not on an unprompted basis. Amongst the issues raised were: "a one stop shop", positive views on the importance of service charters such as that issued by Aberdeenshire Housing, locality of access, some questions of access to Council facilities for people with disabilities and a perceived need for better communication as to the different roles of the Council.

2.26 In the focus group round-up session a number of key requirements were identified. These are summarised below along with the general views of the groups regarding Council performance in relation to these issues.

Attribute	Perception
Efficiency/Value for Money	This was seen as questionable; respondents' perceptions were influenced by perceived lack of efficiency in "visible", labour-intensive services.
Fair	The Council is generally perceived to act in a fair and even-handed way, other than in relation to some planning decisions
Delivering good services	A mixed, but generally improving, picture was evident
Sensible and responsible – prudent	The Council was generally seen as living up to this.
Independent politically	This reflects a tradition of independence in the politics of the North East and is seen as being an attribute which has been eroded over time
Accessible	As noted above, there are some specific issues, these are actually relatively minor. The bigger issue can perhaps be described as "psychological accessibility" – people in local communities do not have the sense of affinity with a local Council, and Council offices, which they may have had in the past.

2.27 The key themes identified above were then reviewed against the 2002 survey questionnaire to ensure that all key issues would be examined and that any new and emerging issues could be taken into account. This resulted in the revised survey questionnaire which is set out in Appendix 2. The detailed results of the quantitative survey are set out in the following chapters.

3.0 OVERALL SATISFACTION

3.1 This section sets out patterns of overall satisfaction with Aberdeenshire Council, as identified by the quantitative survey. In a number of cases, the questions used are “benchmark” questions which have been adopted by COSLA and it had been hoped to compare the Council’s results to those of other Councils who had submitted results to COSLA. Unfortunately, a review of the relevant COSLA database showed that no such information had actually been submitted and, thus, these comparisons could not be undertaken. In some instances, relevant to this and other chapters, we have found limited other benchmark information and this is noted where appropriate.

3.2 A “headline” picture of overall satisfaction comes from levels of agreement with the statement *“I am satisfied with Aberdeenshire Council as a provider of local services”*.

The pattern in responses to this question is very positive as illustrated in Figure 3.1 below.

As with many of the graphs in this report, “net agreement” figures are given. That is to say, the figure quoted is the % agreeing with a statement (or expressing satisfaction) less those disagreeing (or expressing dissatisfaction). This allows for agreement and disagreement levels to be taken into account in a single figure, thus allowing for large amounts of data to be summarised easily. Further details of actual agreement and disagreement levels are set out in Appendix 3.

Figure 3.1: Overall Satisfaction

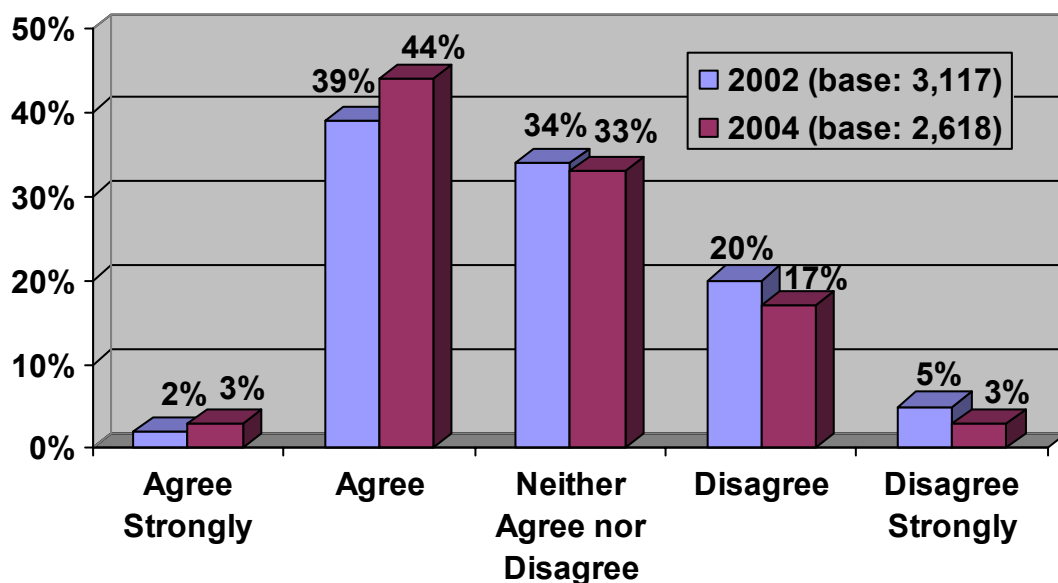


Figure 3.1 demonstrates a net agreement of 27% in 2004, compared to a figure of 16% for 2002. The 2002 Residents' survey report notes a long term decline in satisfaction with services provided by Scottish Local Authorities. For example, the Scottish Council Foundation noted a decline in net satisfaction with Scottish Local Authorities from 42% in 1995 to 18% in 1999. In the 2000 Aberdeenshire Council survey a "net satisfaction" rating of 16% was achieved in response to the question "Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with Aberdeenshire Council as a provider of local services?"

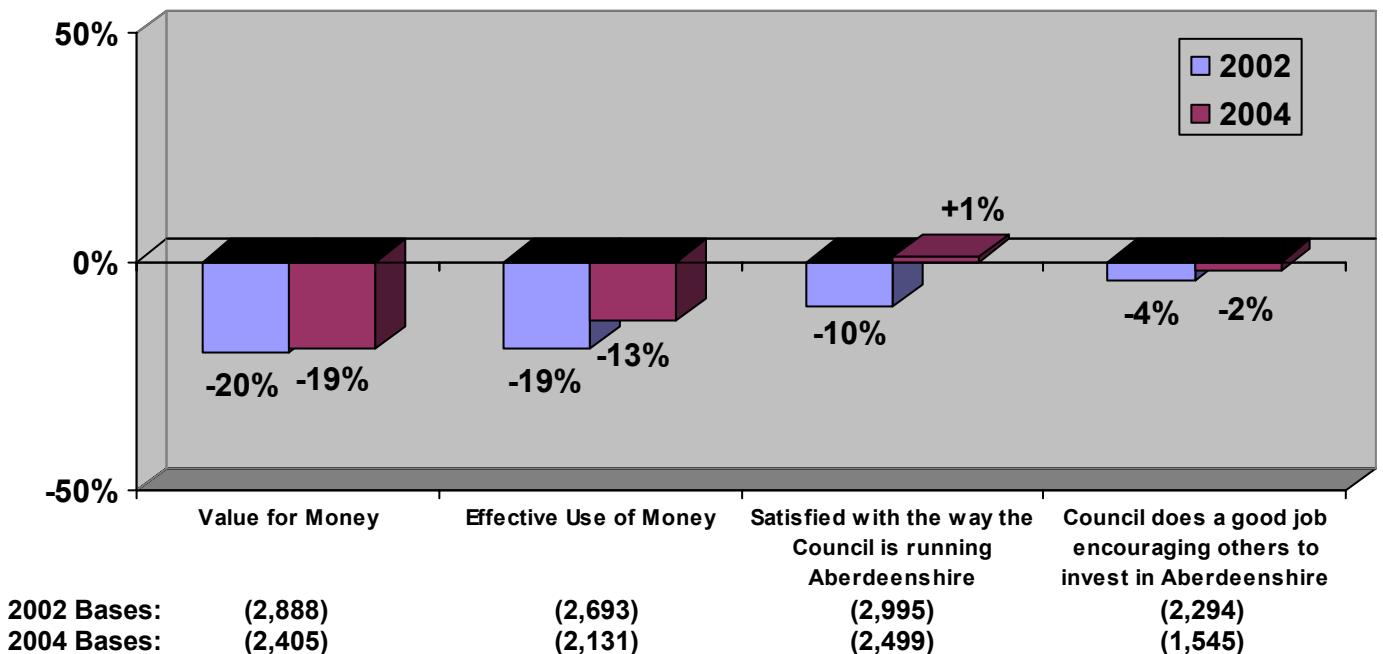
The evidence from the 2004 survey is that this pattern has not only been arrested, but reversed, in the case of Aberdeenshire Council.

The evidence available suggests that this is somewhat against national patterns. For example, MORI has reported that satisfaction levels with English Local Authorities has declined by an average of 10% between 2001 and 2004.

3.3 It should be said that part of this improvement can be attributed to the older age profile of the 2004 sample (retired people were the most likely to express positive views and high levels of satisfaction). However, even amongst the younger age groups, ratings are increasingly positive. For example, the net satisfaction rating amongst 18-34 year olds was +19%, which compares favourably with the +16% recorded for the sample as a whole in 2002.

3.4 The overall views of the Aberdeenshire population were explored, in both 2002 and 2004, with reference to a number of attitudinal statements. As can be seen below, whilst the pattern is a generally positive one, respondents' retained a number of negative views with respect to these statements.

Figure 3.2: Overall Views on Key Issues

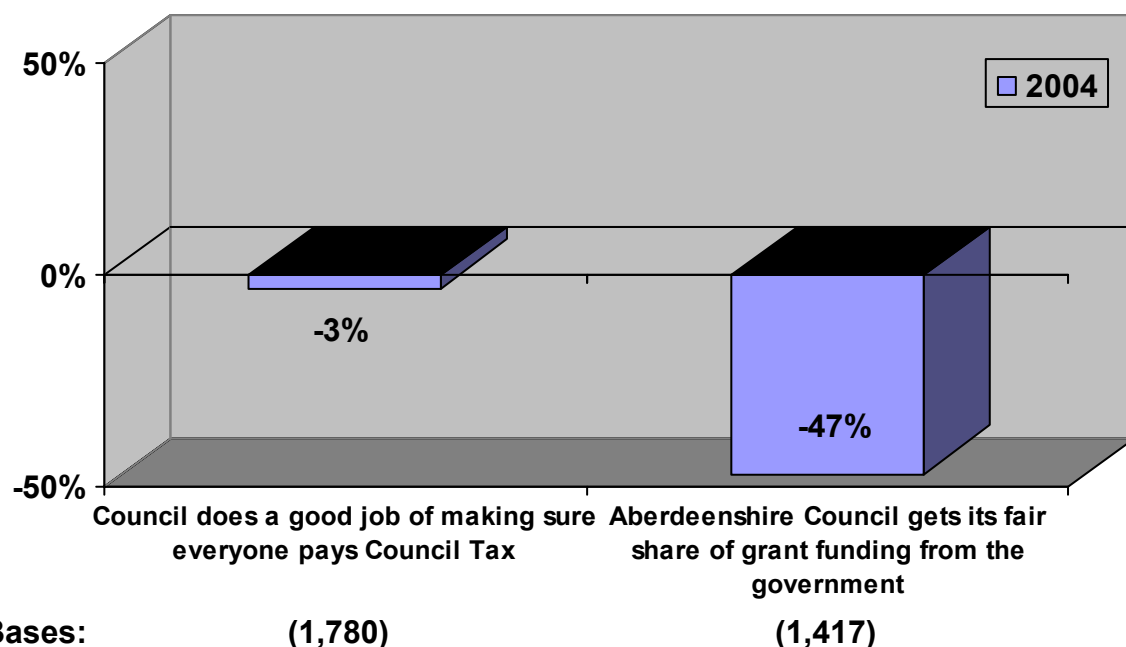


The key points to note are:

- A majority do not believe that Aberdeenshire Council gives its residents Value for Money and there is little sign of improvement in this area.
- Respondents are slightly more likely to perceive that “the Council does the best it can to make effective use of the money available to it”; however, a significant majority continue to disagree with this contention.
- More positively a very slight majority now agree with the statement that “I am satisfied with the way the Council is running Aberdeenshire” and there are significantly improved perceptions in this area.
- There is little change of view in relation to the statement that “Aberdeenshire Council does a good job encouraging others to invest in Aberdeenshire”; there is a very high “don’t know” response to this question (45%).

3.5 Two new questions of an “overall nature” were added in to the 2004 survey, and results for these are detailed in Figure 3.3 below:

Figure 3.3:



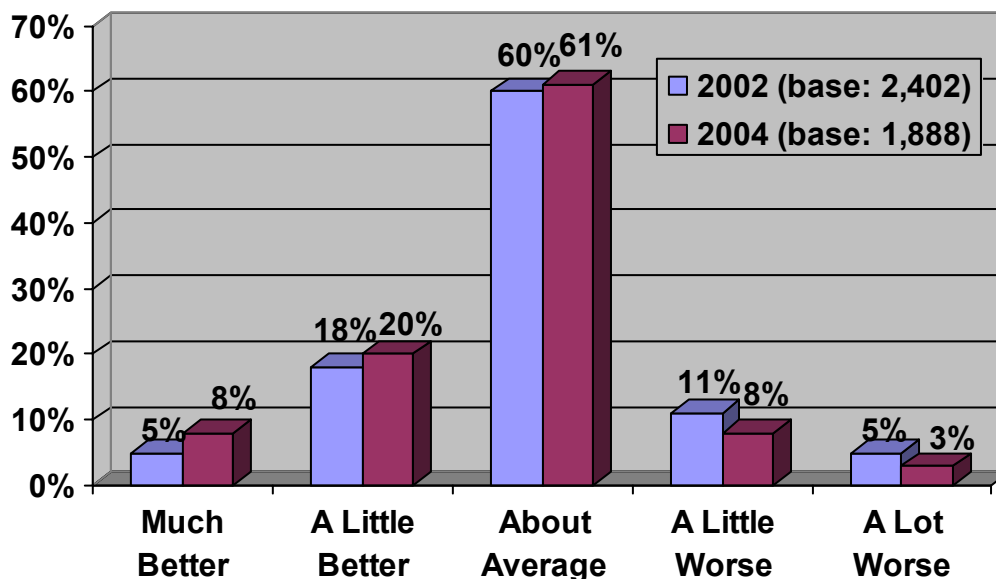
There are mixed views as to whether the Council does a good job of making sure everyone pays their Council Tax and, again, a very high “don’t know” response (36%).

Aberdeenshire residents are also very likely to believe that the Council does not get its fair share of grant funding from the government. In fact, only 7% of total respondents believe the Council does get its fair share. Almost half of respondents (49%) fall into the “don’t know” category.

- 3.6 There is, however, further positive news for the Council in relation to how Aberdeenshire residents perceive it in relation to other Councils.

The 2002 results for this were themselves positive (23% believing the Council to be better than others and 18% worse – a net approval of 7%). This gap has widened considerably; 28% of 2004 respondents believe Aberdeenshire Council to be better than other Councils and only 8% worse (a positive gap of 20%).

Figure 3.4: Overall Views (Comparison to Other Councils)



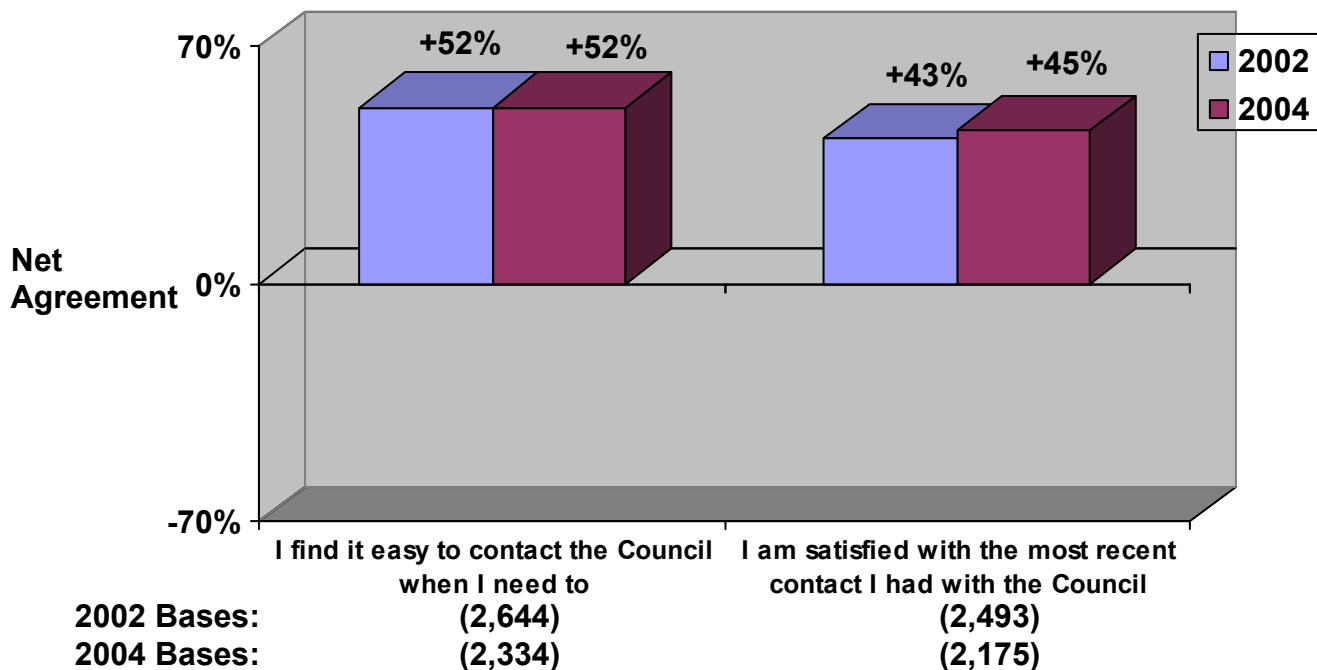
- 3.7 The 2002 report notes that residents in Banff and Buchan and Buchan actually accorded negative ratings to Aberdeenshire Council for this question. This situation has now changed and positive ratings are achieved from each of the six administrative areas. However, Banff and Buchan residents continue to be the least positive about the Council. For example, the “net satisfaction” rating with the Council as a provider of local services is 18%, compared to 27% for the sample as a whole and 39% in Garioch.

4.0 CUSTOMER SERVICE AND CONTACT MANAGEMENT

CONTACTING THE COUNCIL

4.1 The Council maintains its generally positive ratings in terms of ease of contact as illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1: Contacting the Council



These are generally positive ratings and there is no evidence of any particular groups of people or particular localities, finding it particularly difficult to contact the Council.

Satisfaction with actual “contacts” is lower amongst the younger age groups than it is amongst older people. For example, amongst those in the 75+ age group, net satisfaction with the most recent contact was 69% compared to 34% amongst 25+34 year olds. This is a significant distinction which is worthy of further consideration.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

4.2 2004 (but not 2002) respondents were asked to rank the importance of a series of customer service attributes by selecting their top 5 most important attributes from a prompted list of 14. The results of this are illustrated in Figures 4.2(a) and (b) below.

Figure 4.2(a): Importance of Service Attributes

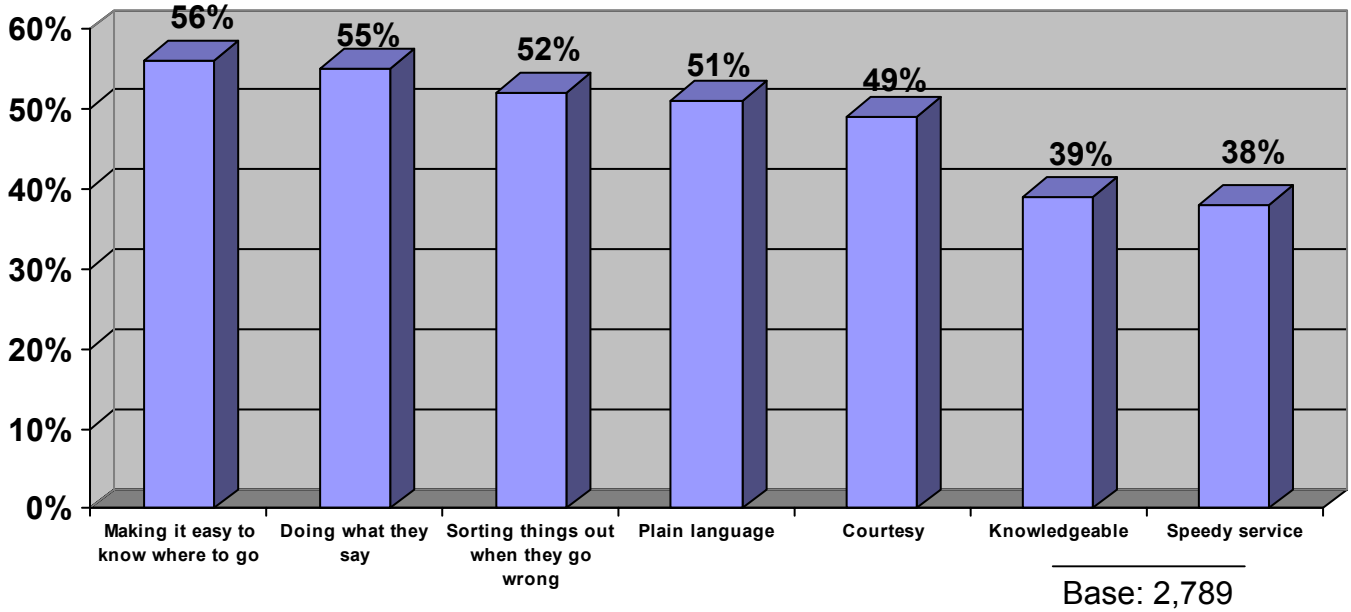
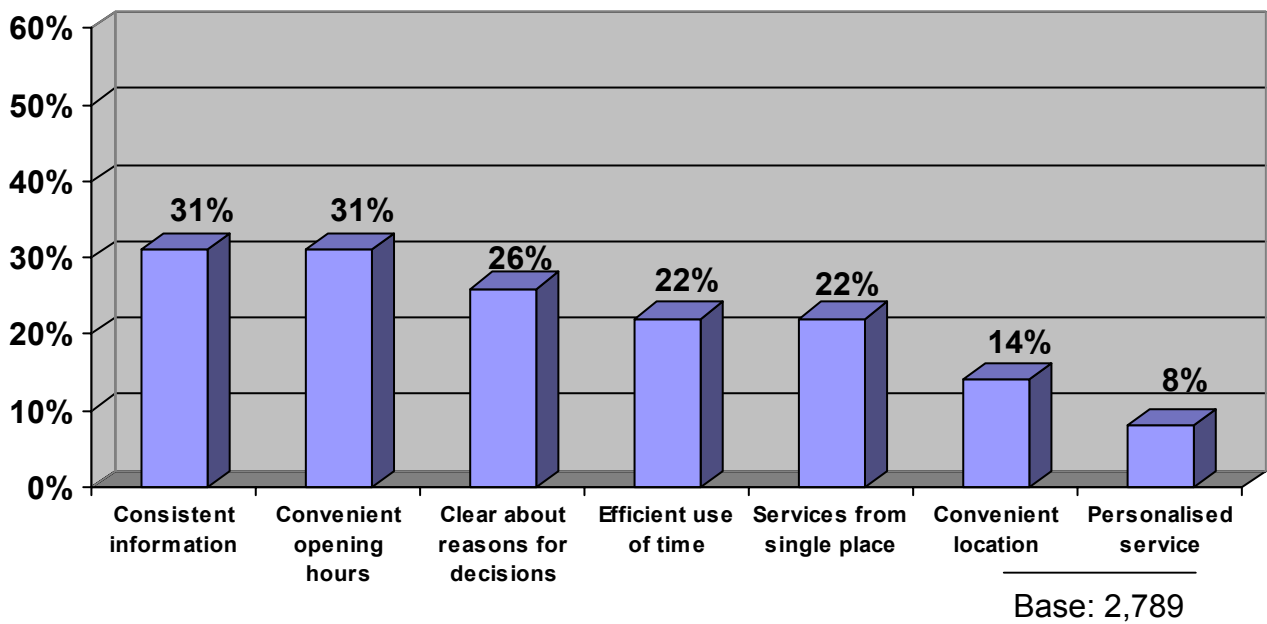


Figure 4.2(b): Importance of Service Attributes



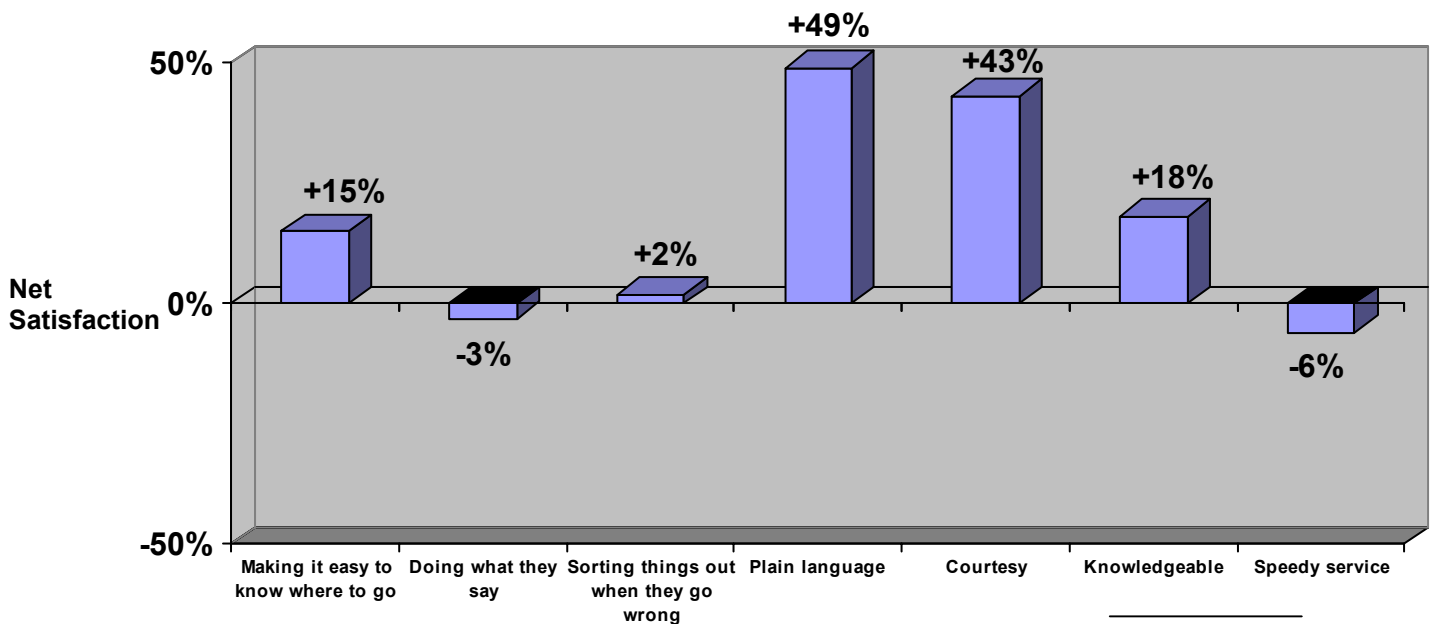
These charts are relatively “flat” suggesting that most of these attributes are important to at least a significant minority of respondents.

This said, the attributes which appear to be of particular importance are:

- Making it easy to know where to go for help and advice
- “Doing what they say they will do”
- Sorting things out when they go wrong
- Communicating in plain language
- Treating individuals with courtesy.

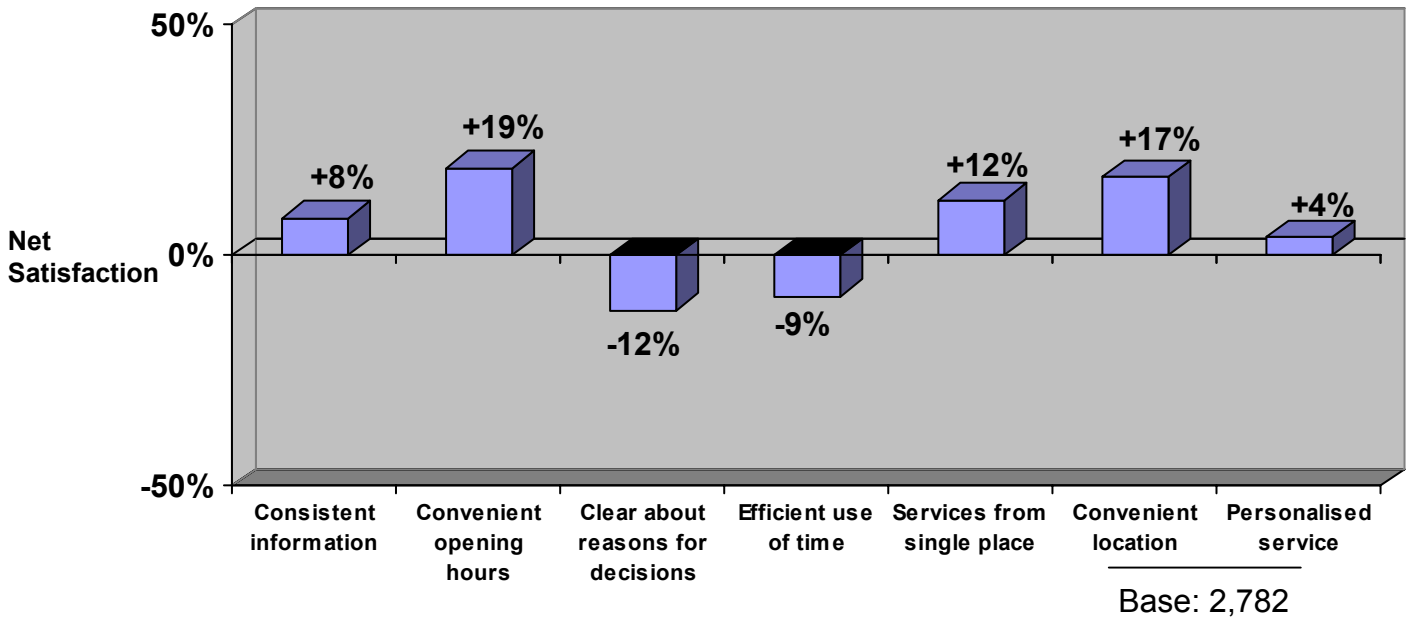
4.3 Figures 4.3(a) and (b) below map out net satisfaction ratings accorded to each of these issues, in order of the priority according to respondents.

Figure 4.3(a): Rating of Service Attributes



Base: 2,782

Figure 4.3(b): Rating of Service Attributes



This shows a very mixed picture. The Council is positively rated for two of the most important service attributes (language and courtesy). It does, however, achieve negative ratings for:

- “Doing what they say they will do”
- “Providing a speedy service”
- “Being clear about why they have made a certain decision”
- “Making efficient use of their time”.

Whilst these are all important issues, the first is of particular importance given the priority which respondents ascribe to it.

- 4.4 It is fair to say, however, that any such concerns are not new and, indeed, that where there have been changes they have generally been positive (although modestly so).

Figures 4.4(a) and (b) set out the mean ratings achieved for each of these attributes where a five point scale from very good to very poor was utilised. This method of reporting the data is designed to be comparable with the way in which this data was reported for the 2002 survey, allowing a large amount of data to be incorporated in a single graph. 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, poor rating a score of minus 1 and a very poor rating a score of minus 2.

Figure 4.4(a): Customer Service Ratings

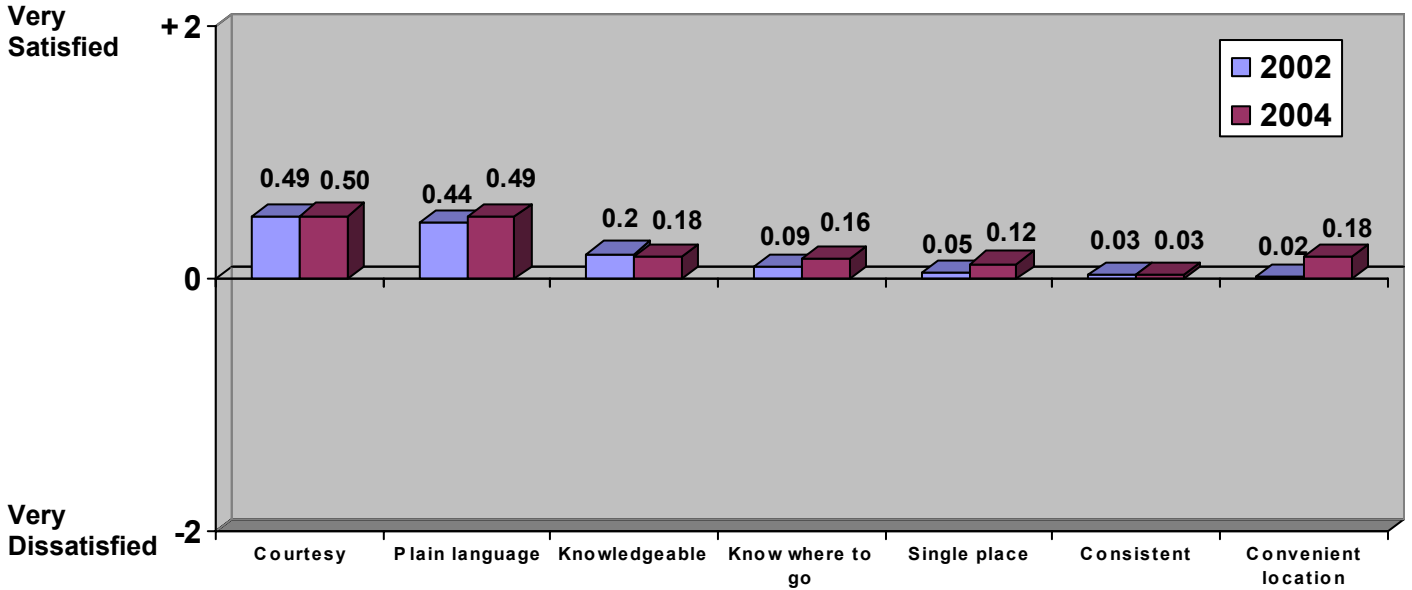
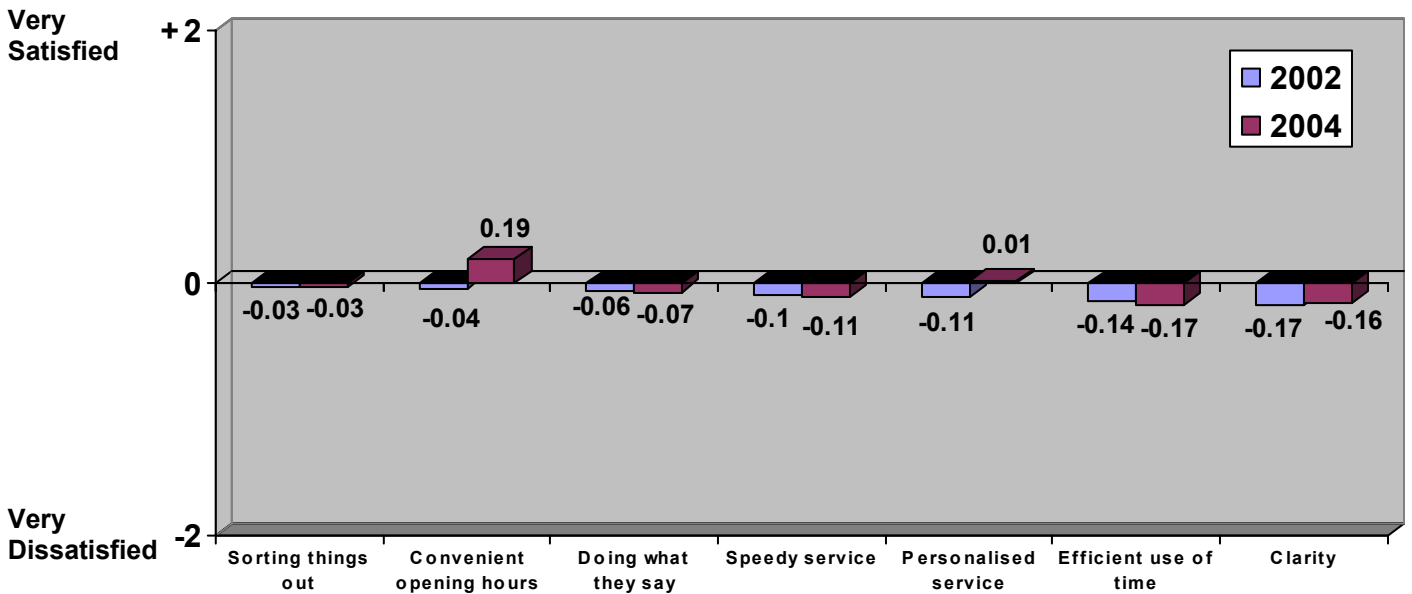


Figure 4.4(b): Customer Service Ratings



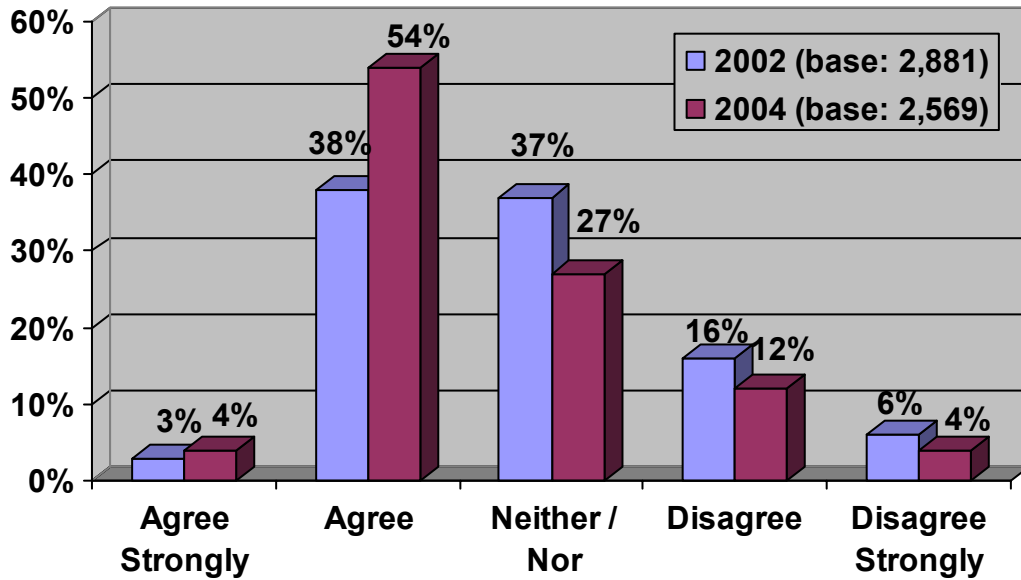
Modest improvements are evident with regards to:

- “Letting you access their services from a convenient location”
- Having opening hours which are convenient for the public
- Providing a personalised service to you (although from a low base, with this theme, perhaps surprisingly, not being viewed as a key priority).

INFORMATION

4.5 There are encouraging signs of improved satisfaction with the information which people receive on Council services.

Figure 4.5: “Overall, I am satisfied with the information I get on council services”



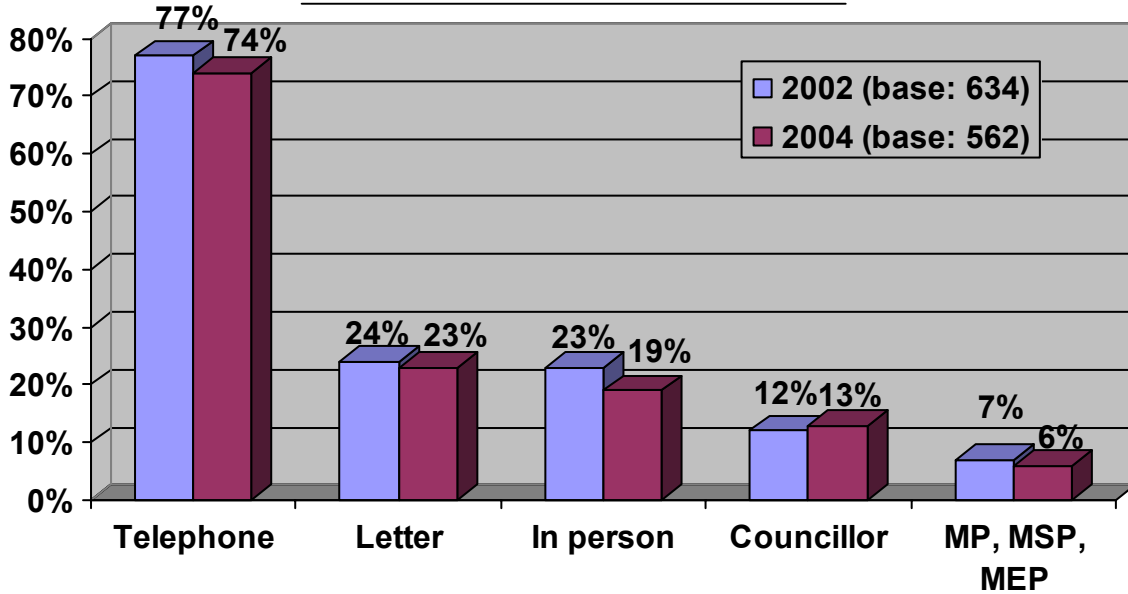
58% of people are now satisfied with this, compared to 16% dissatisfied, with any distinctions between sub-groups of the sample being relatively minor.

COMPLAINT HANDLING

4.6 20% of the sample claimed to have made a complaint to the Council “in the past 12 months”. The figure in 2002 was 19% and this change is not statistically significant.

Figure 4.6 below profile the method of “complaint”. It should be noted that the base for this question is much lower as only those who had made a complaint were invited to complete this question.

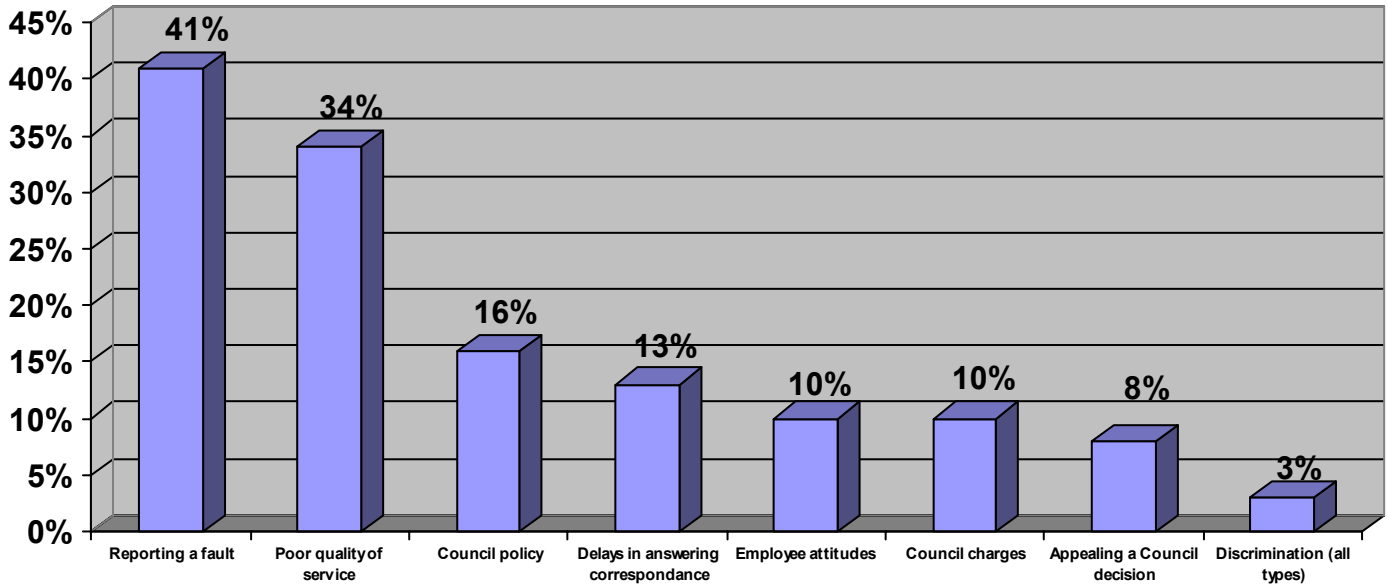
Figure 4.6: Method of Complaint



Again, the profile has changed little between 2002 and 2004. It seems likely that many telephone “complaints” would not have been recorded formally as such.

4.7 This is reflected in the profile of reasons for the complaint, which was recorded in 2004, for the first time.

Figure 4.7: Reason for Complaint (2004)



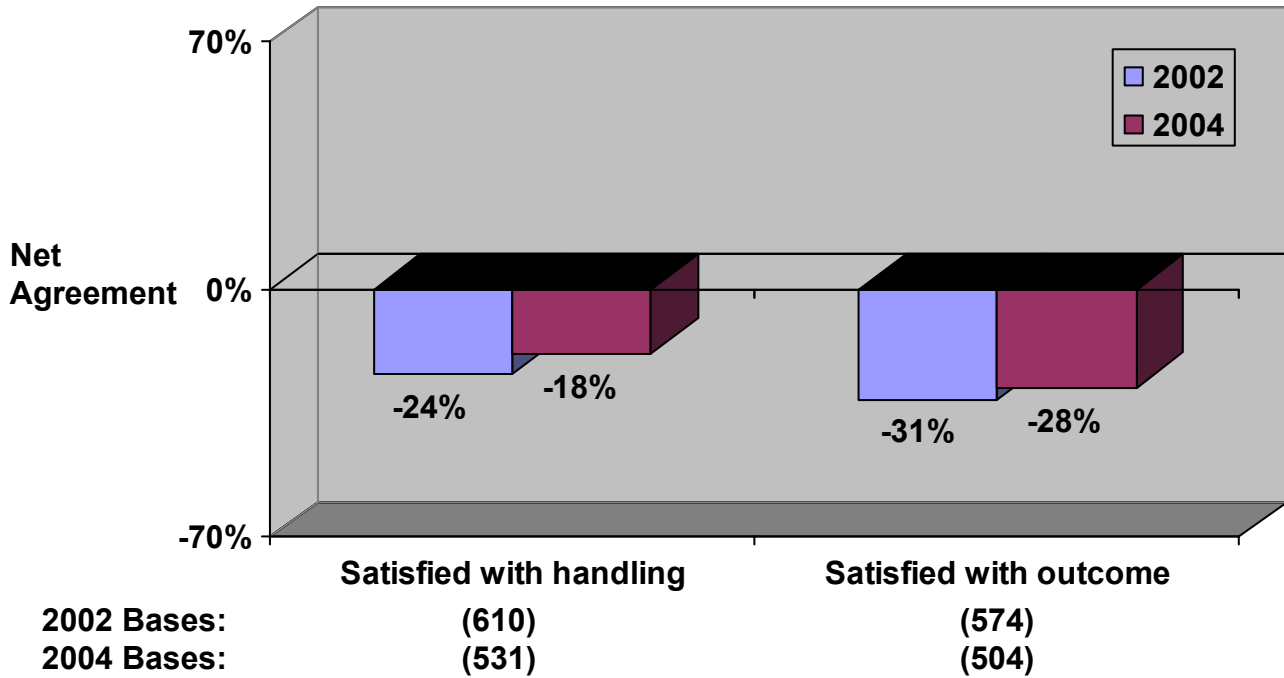
Base: 562

Clearly, many “complaints” are simply the reporting of faults (e.g. street lighting, pot holes etc.). Poor quality of service is another common issue, however, the Council may wish to consider how such complaints are recorded and dealt with. “Delays in answering correspondence” could also sit within this overall theme of customer service facilities.

Other than this, the most common complaints appear to relate to matters of policy, rather than service delivery.

4.8 The 2002 survey noted high levels of net dissatisfaction with the handling and outcome of complaints. The evidence for 2004 is that only modest improvements have been made in this regard.

Figure 4.8: Satisfaction with Complaints



This issue remains a concern and is perhaps worthy of more detailed investigation.

5.0 THE COMMUNITIES OF ABERDEENSHIRE

5.1 As with the 2002 survey, 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 5.1 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 of towns and villages”.
- “The Council does a good job in making towns and villages in Aberdeenshire attractive places for tourists”.

Again, this chart is presented in the form of “mean ratings” to ensure comparability with 2002 data. Thus, an “agree strongly” response is accorded a score of +2, and “agree” a score of +1 and so on, with the aggregate result being expressed as a mean rating.

Figure 5.1: The Communities of Aberdeenshire – Towns and Villages



There are some positive patterns evident.

More people believe the Council is doing a good job of keeping towns and villages clean and tidy. Buchan and Kincardine and Mearns residents continue to be the least positive about this issue. However, levels of dissatisfaction have fallen slightly from 37% to 32% in Buchan and from 35% to 31% in Kincardine and Mearns.

A similar positive pattern is evident in relation to the Council's performance in making towns and villages attractive places to live (53% now agree with this statement compared to 42% in 2002). Banff and Buchan residents remain the least positive (only 39% agree that the Council is doing a good job in this regard).

Again, a positive pattern is evident in terms of people's perceptions of the Council making towns and villages attractive for tourists. Despite this, a slight majority of residents believe the Council does not do a good job in this regard. Such views are most common in:

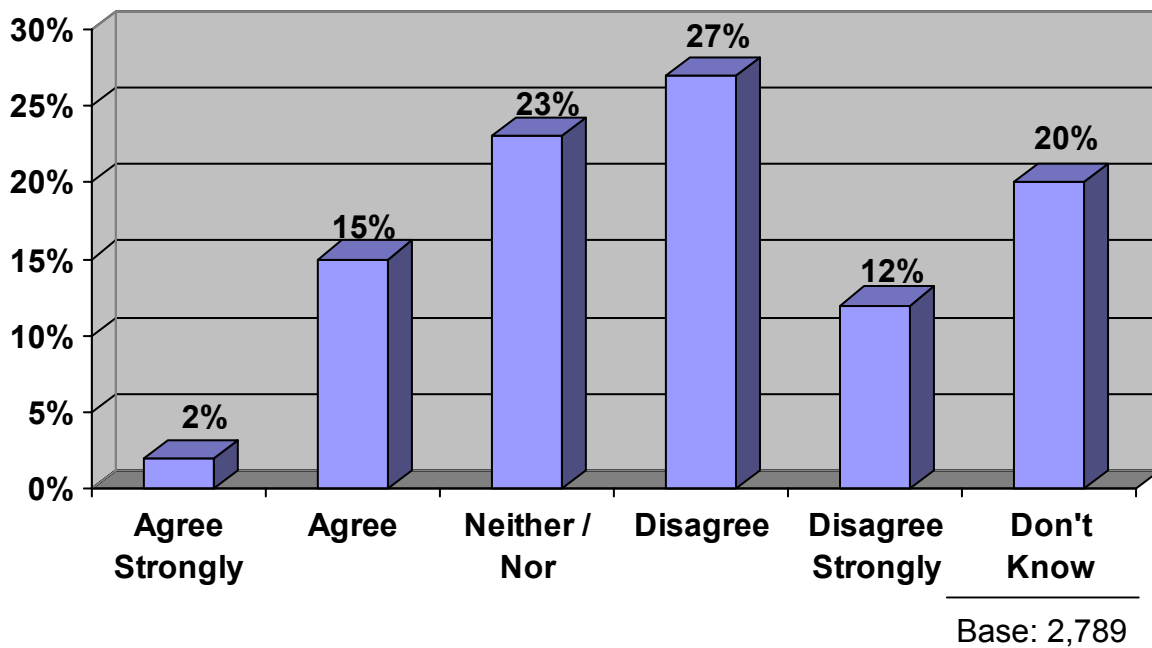
- Banff and Buchan (45% disagree that the Council is doing a good job in this regard).
- Buchan (48% disagree).
- Kincardine and Mearns (39% disagree).

Views have changed little regarding whether the Council "wastes money on projects to improve the look of towns and villages".

5.2 A new question was asked of 2004 respondents regarding the Council planning policy, which had arisen as an issue in the focus groups.

Figure 5.2: Planning (2004 only)

The Council takes account of the impact on local services and facilities when it makes planning decisions



Clearly, very negative perceptions of this issue are evident and this is common across all the Council's administrative areas.

5.3 The full area breakdown for these questions for the 2004 survey is as follows:

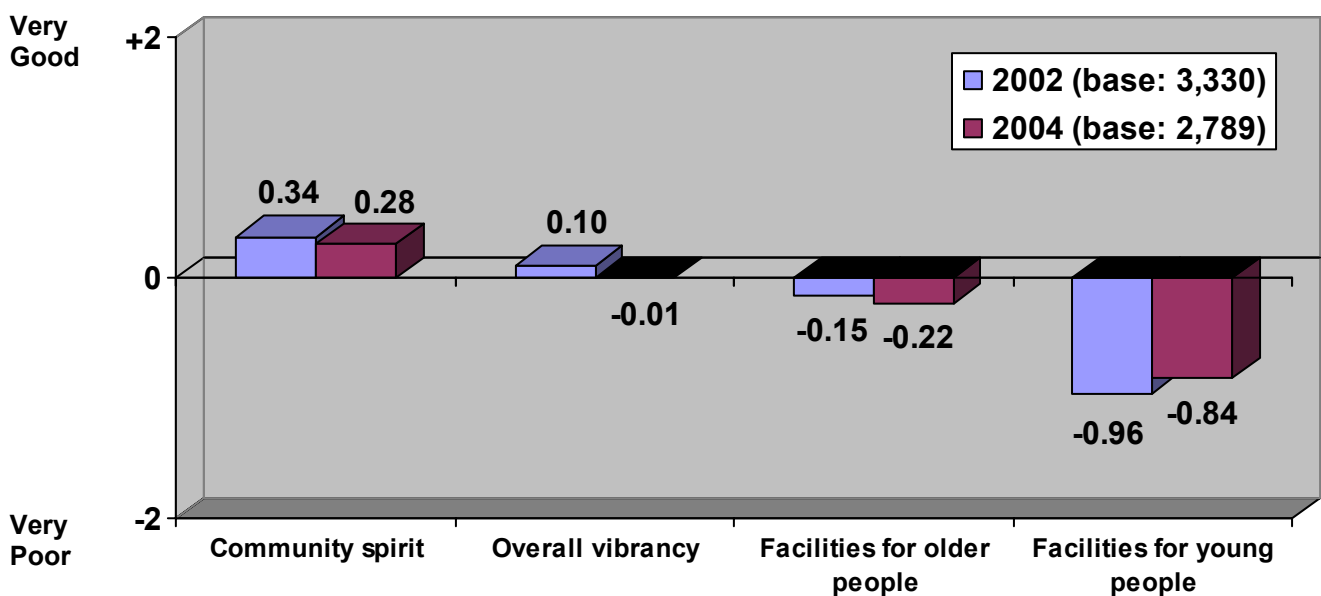
	Net Agreement					
	Buchan	Banff and Buchan	Formartine	Garioch	Kincardine and Mearns	Marr
The Council does a good job in making towns and villages in Aberdeenshire attractive places <u>to live</u>	14%	4%	37%	43%	26%	40%
The Council does a good job in making towns and villages in Aberdeenshire attractive places for <u>tourists</u>	-17%	-15%	10%	12%	-6%	24%
The Council does a good job in keeping towns and villages clean and tidy	17%	22%	35%	44%	17%	42%
The Council wastes money on projects to improve the looks of town and villages	4%	11%	-6%	-13%	-18%	-16%
The Council takes account of the impact on local services and facilities when it makes planning decisions	-18%	-22%	-24%	-22%	-31%	-17%

5.4 Wider questions were repeated from the 2002 survey 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 5.3 below.

Figure 5.3: The Communities of Aberdeenshire – Community Issues



Unlike many of the other strands of the 2004 survey, few significant improvements in perception are apparent.

Ratings for community spirit are generally low, especially in Banff and Buchan (where 29% believe community spirit to be poor or very poor and Buchan (where 27% believe likewise).

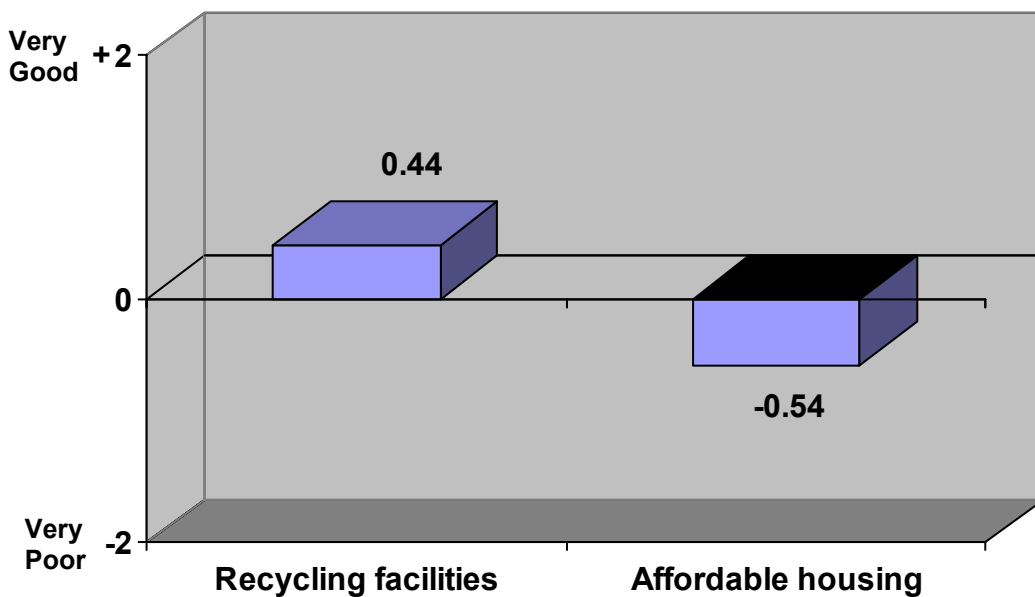
This view is reflected in the ratings provided for “the overall vibrancy of the community”. Indeed, the 2002 report notes that 41% of people in Aberdeenshire rated the “vibrancy” of their community positively; this figure has fallen to 27% in 2004 and is again most marked in the more peripheral communities (only 15% of people in Banff and Buchan and 17% of people in Buchan provide positive ratings for “vibrancy”).

The question of facilities continues to be a problem, particularly with respect to facilities for younger people (69% of people expressing a view rate these as poor or very poor and this view is common throughout Aberdeenshire). It is a particularly common view amongst 19-24 year olds, where only 2% of respondents provide a positive rating for the availability of facilities.

Whilst dissatisfaction is less apparent with regard to “facilities for older people” a clear majority continue to rate the availability of such facilities negatively. Such views are more common amongst middle-aged groups (e.g. 42% of 45-54 year olds provide a negative rating) than amongst older people themselves (28% of those in the 75+ age groups provide a negative rating).

- 5.5 2004 respondents were asked to comment on two additional issues, which again arose in the exploratory focus groups, recycling facilities and affordable housing.

Figure 5.4: Additional Community Issues



Base: 2,789

Generally positive views were evident with respect to recycling facilities, although it should be noted that 18% of respondents gave a negative rating.

However, the ratings for the availability of affordable housing suggests that this issue is a major concern for Aberdeenshire residents. Taking out “don’t know” responses, only 14% gave a positive rating for the availability of affordable housing compared to the 46% who gave a negative rating. This pattern was particularly evident in those areas closer to Aberdeen (e.g. 76% of Marr residents rated the availability of affordable housing as poor).

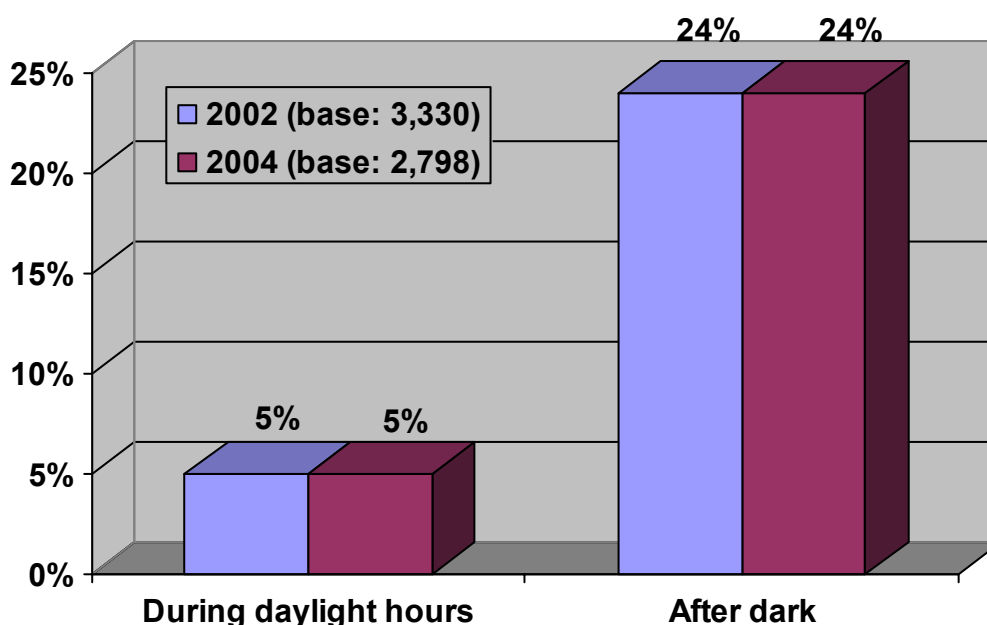
5.6 The full area breakdown for these questions for the 2004 survey is as follows:

	Net Positive					
	Buchan	Banff and Buchan	Formartine	Garioch	Kincardine and Mearns	Marr
Sense of community spirit	5%	3%	27%	34%	29%	34%
Facilities for young people (up to 17 years)	-66%	-59%	-49%	-35%	-56%	-43%
Facilities for older people	-32%	-21%	-9%	-3%	-11%	-13%
The overall vibrancy of the community	-17%	-24%	4%	21%	7%	17%
Recycling facilities	36%	34%	47%	44%	15%	46%
Availability of affordable housing	-13%	-12%	-31%	-31%	-32%	-50%

5.7 The final issue investigated under the community theme was personal safety. As can be seen from Figure 5.5, there has been no change in perception between 2002 and 2004.

Figure 5.5: Personal Safety

% feeling either quite or very unsafe



Only a very small proportion of people feel unsafe during daylight hours (5%). The only significant difference in opinion is in Banff/Buchan (10% 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 (the figure rises to 29%)
- People living in Banff and Buchan (45%, up from 38% in 2002)
- People living in Buchan (44% up from 41% in 2002).

6.0 ROADS AND TRANSPORT

6.1 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 the majority of road maintenance in the area, the trunk roads (A90 and A96) were maintained by BEAR Scotland, 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 subsidise certain routes and did seek to influence public transport providers to make sure that Aberdeenshire residents' needs were met.

6.2 Views were sought on a range of issues relating to roads and transport, 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 Figures 6.1(a) and (b) below:

Figure 6.1(a): Roads and Transport

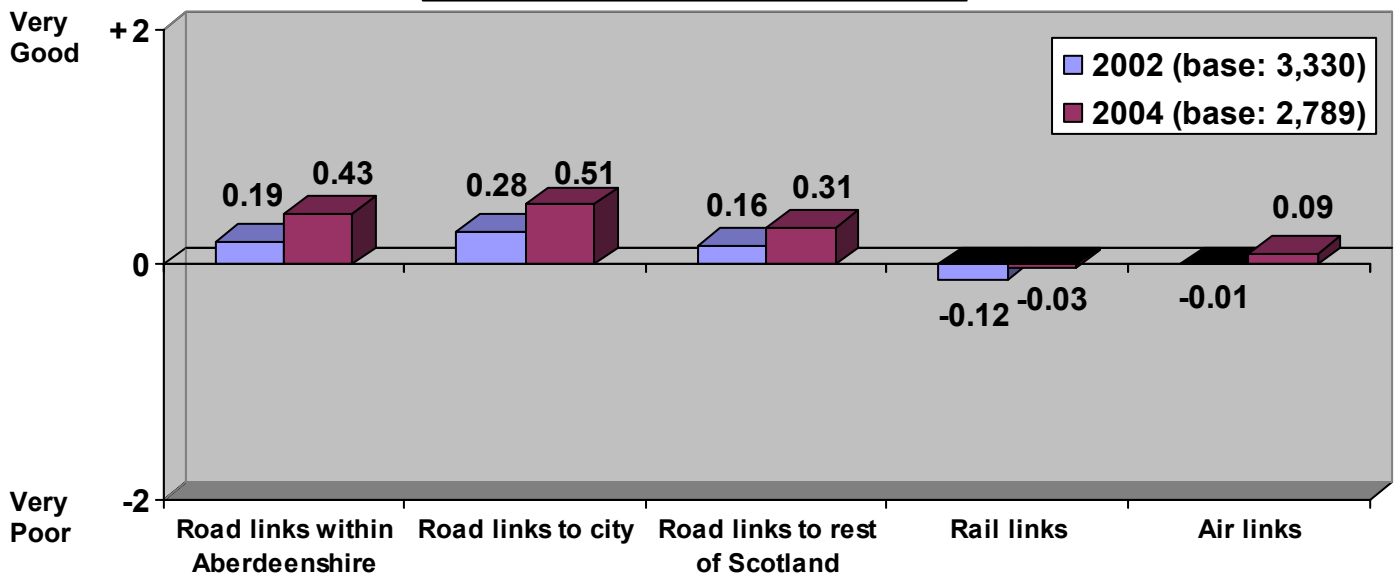
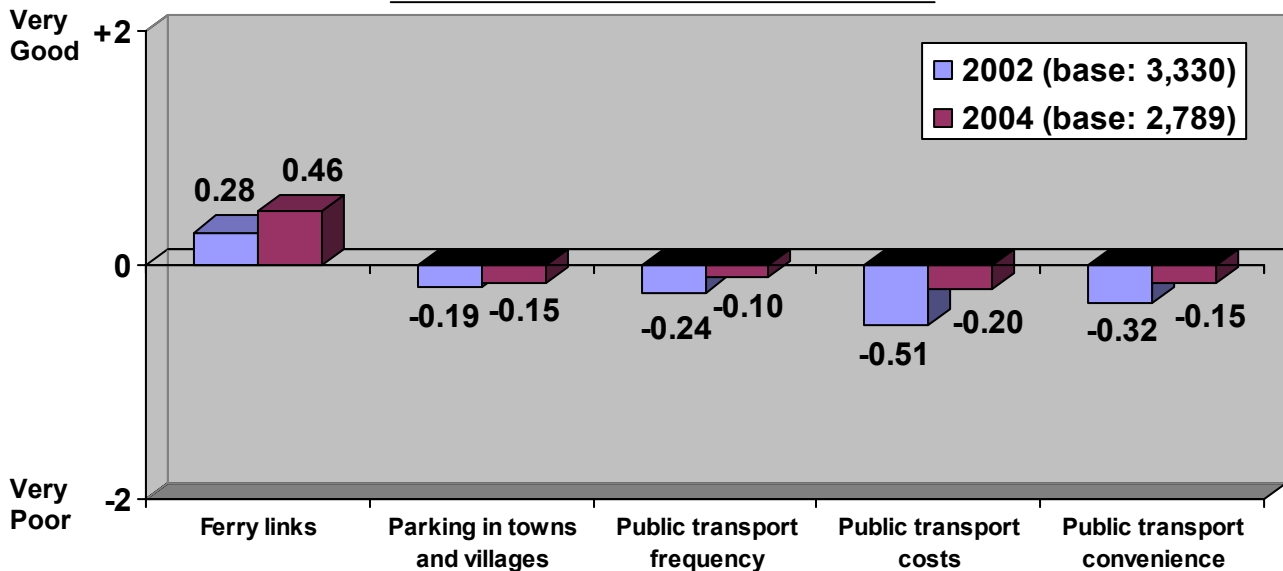


Figure 6.1(b): Roads and Transport



6.3 A number of noteworthy changes in perception are evident from Figures 6.1(a) and (b).

There is generally improving satisfaction with road links, especially road links within Aberdeenshire and to Aberdeen City. The reasons for this are uncertain, but it may be that the impact of roads' investment over the past decade is beginning to come through in surveys such as this.

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

- Negative (though slightly improved) 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 again perceptions have improved slightly.
- Although there was a high don't know response (49%), those who did respond tended to rate ferry links to the Northern Isles reasonably positively (55% rated these links as good compared to only 47% in 2002).
- A significant number of people (42%) rated the availability of parking in towns and villages as poor. Those living in Buchan were most likely to be negative (50%), closely followed by Banff and Buchan (49%).

6.4 A particular feature of this question was the continued negative findings in relation to various dimensions of public transport. For example:

- 41% of people rate the frequency of public transport to and from the area which they live as being poor or very poor.
- 43% rate the cost of public transport links as being poor and 42% rate the convenience of public transport links as being poor.

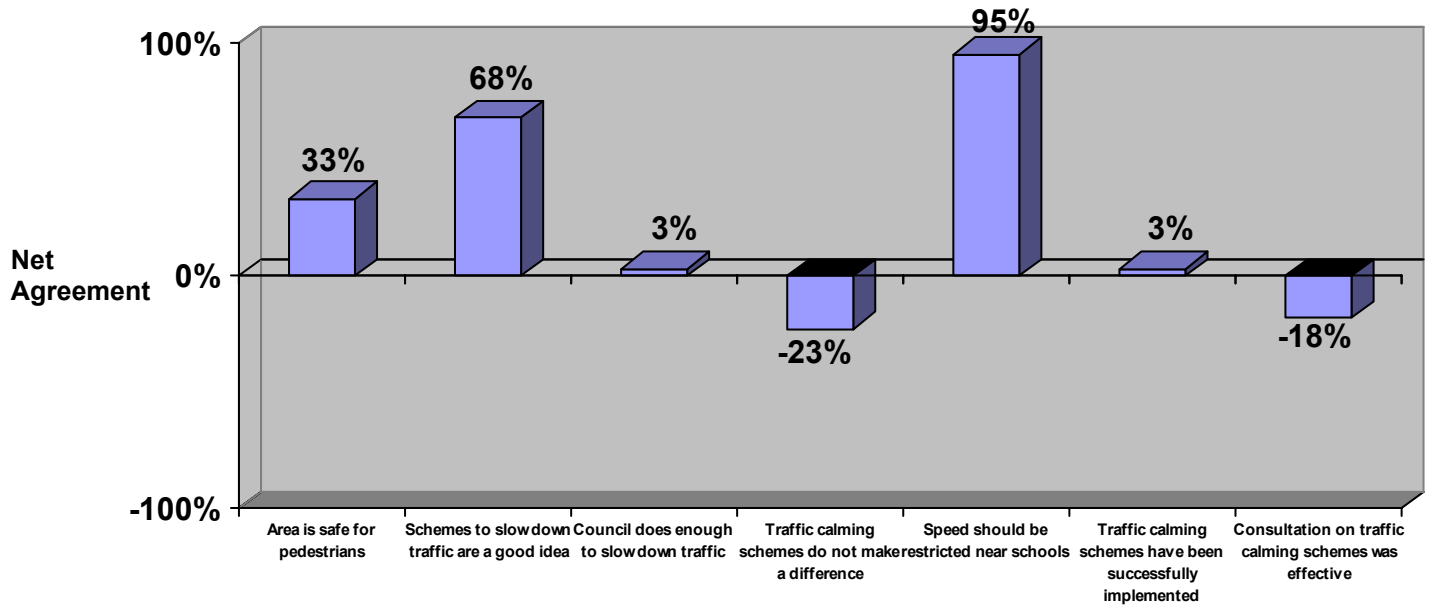
Such views are fairly widely held across the different communities of Aberdeenshire.

However, albeit starting from a low base, the pattern is a positive one. For example, previously, 52% of respondents rated the cost of public transport as poor.

6.5 The 2004 survey explored a range of issues around the theme of traffic calming schemes, which had emerged as an area of significant concern for the focus groups. The summary results of this are detailed below.

It should be noted that these figures again represent “net agreement” figures. That is, the proportion who agree, less the proportion who disagree. Of course, neutral responses could also be given.

Figure 6.2: Traffic Calming Schemes



Base: 2,789

It is clear from these figures that there is considerable support in principle for traffic calming initiatives. For example, although a majority of people believe their area to be safe for pedestrians, a significant minority (26%) believe the area to be unsafe to some degree. There is almost universal agreement that “schemes to slow down traffic are a good idea” (only 10% disagree) and, in particular, that traffic should be slowed down near schools (only 2% disagree). There is a net disagreement with the negative proposition that “traffic calming schemes do not make a real difference to road safety”.

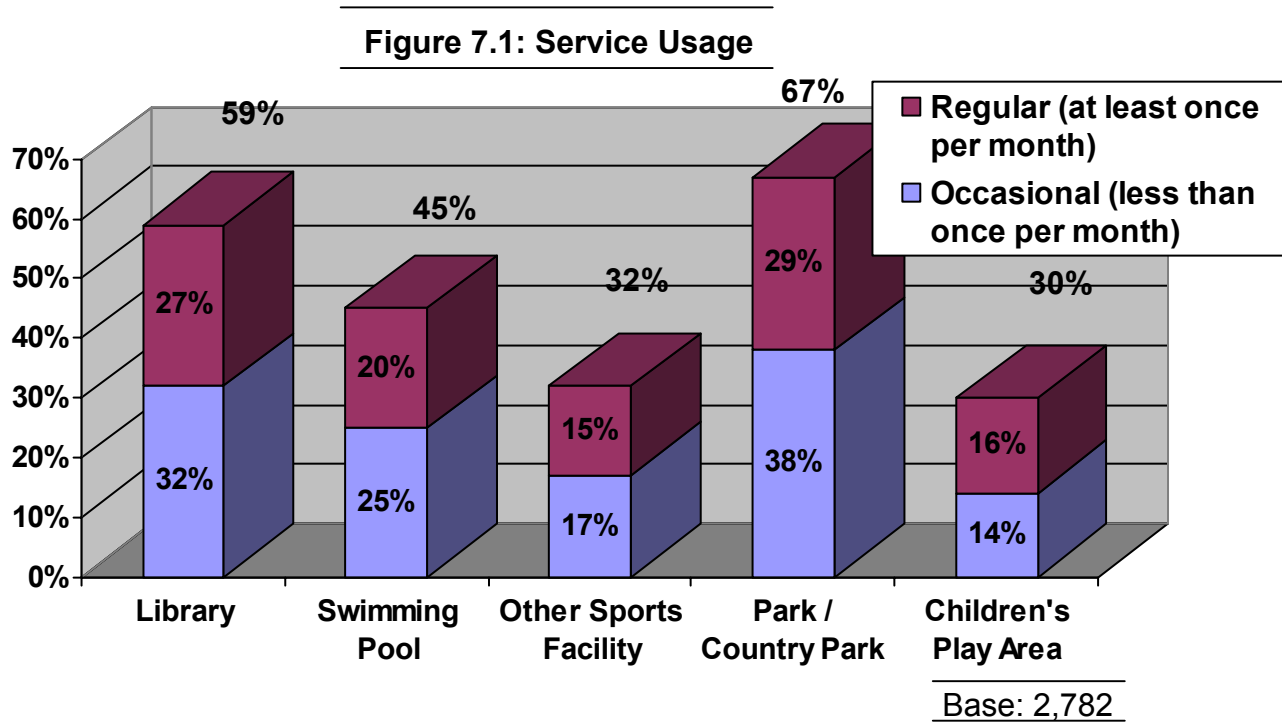
In other words, the majority of people do believe that traffic calming schemes make a real difference to road safety.

There are mixed views as to whether the Council “does enough to slow down the traffic where I live” (41% agree and 38% disagree) suggesting public support for greater efforts in this area.

However, opinions are divided as to whether schemes have been implemented successfully (37% believe they have whilst 35% disagree). This reflects the concerns expressed in the focus groups as to whether appropriate schemes had been put in place and whether they were effectively enforced. A majority of respondents did not feel that the Council's consultation on the implementation of such schemes was effective.

7.0 SATISFACTION WITH KEY SERVICES

7.1 Figure 7.1 profiles usage of a range of Council facilities.



Clearly, such facilities are an important part of individuals' lives within their communities.

SERVICE SATISFACTION

7.2 Figures 7.2(a) and (b) profile the levels of satisfaction with a range of specific Council services.

Figure 7.2(a): Services You Use – Specific Services

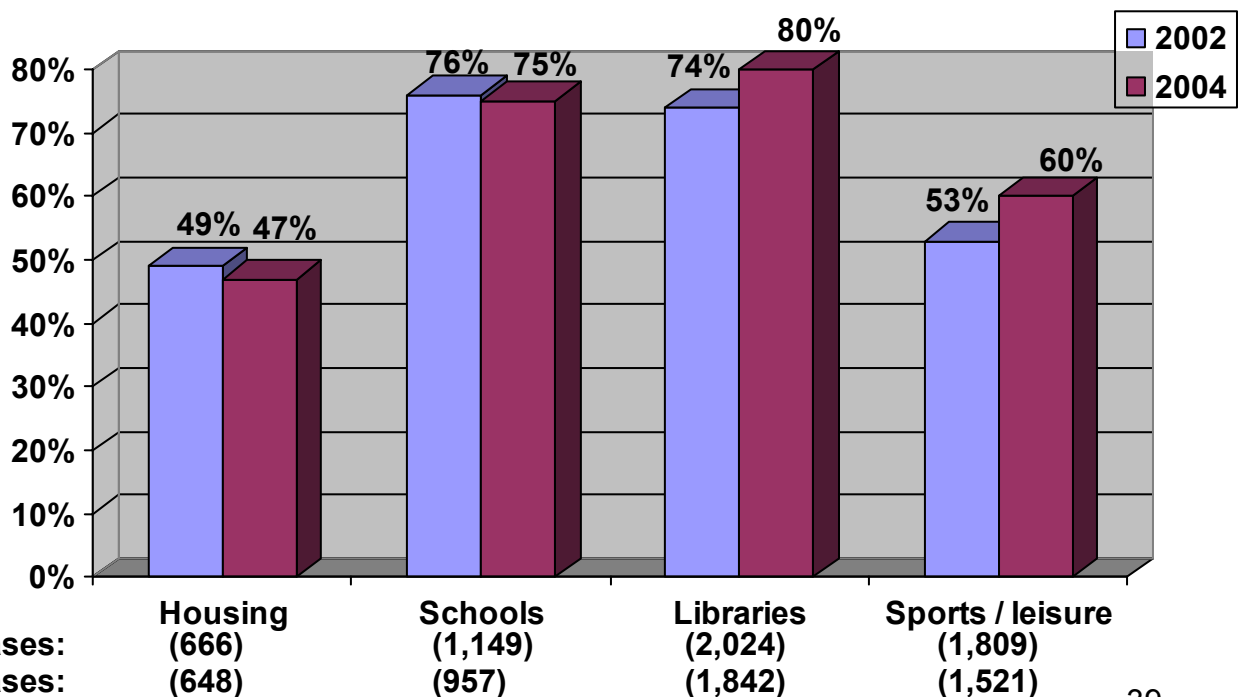
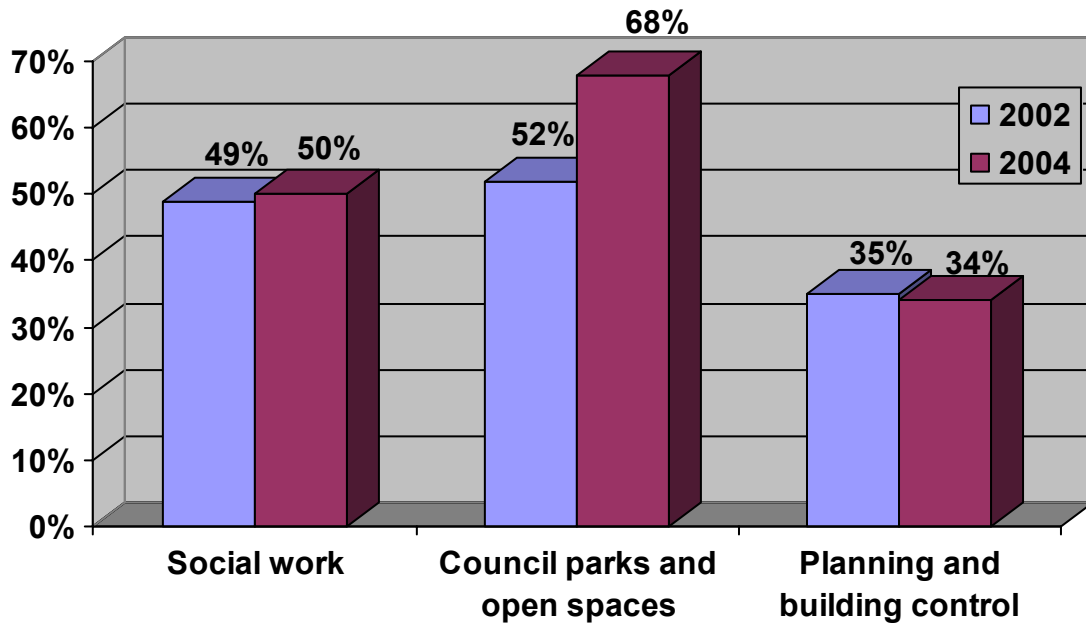


Figure 7.2(b): Services You Use – Specific Services



2002 Bases: (774)
2004 Bases: (709)

(2,278)
(1,994)

(1,412)
(1,431)

These results continue to be generally positive. For example,

- “Schools” retain their very high satisfaction rating
- Satisfaction levels with libraries has risen further from an already high base
- There have been significant improvements in satisfaction ratings with Council parks and open spaces and, to a lesser extent, sport and leisure facilities.

7.3 There continues to be a positive net satisfaction with both housing and social work services, albeit at a lower level than the services described above. The likelihood is that this is reflective of the challenging nature of certain aspects of housing and social work services.

7.4 Ratings for planning and building control continues to be rated lowest amongst this batch of services. Previous reports have suggested that this is a function of policy, rather than service delivery. The public concerns noted in this report over the implementation of planning decisions would tend to endorse this view.

7.5 Cross-tabulation of data to identify the views of actual service users is instructive. For example:

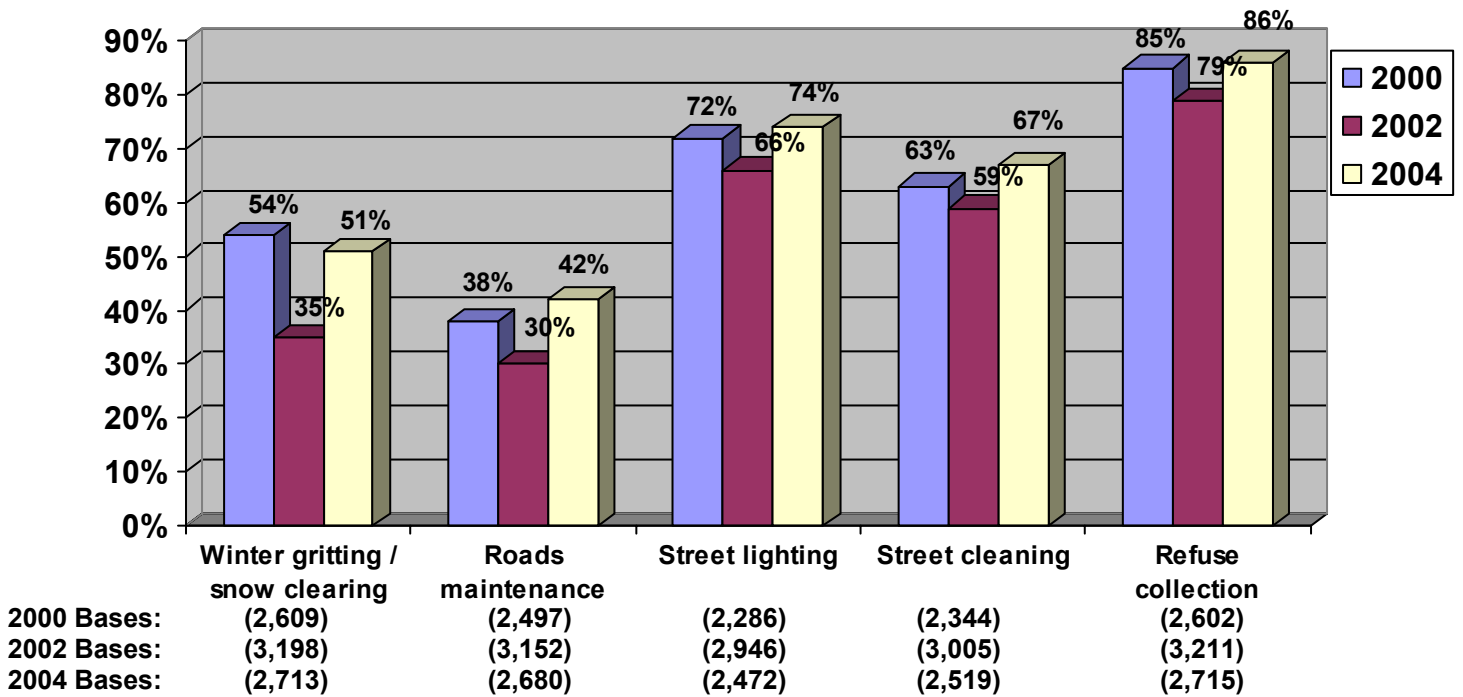
- 83% of people with children at Council-run schools expressed satisfaction
- 84% of library users expressed satisfaction

- 68% of users of Council-run leisure and sports facilities expressed satisfaction.

Clearly, there is an evident pattern 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.

7.6 Levels of satisfaction for a range of universal services can now be tracked over a four-year period, as illustrated in Figure 7.3 below.

Figure 7.3: Services Everybody Uses – Universal Services



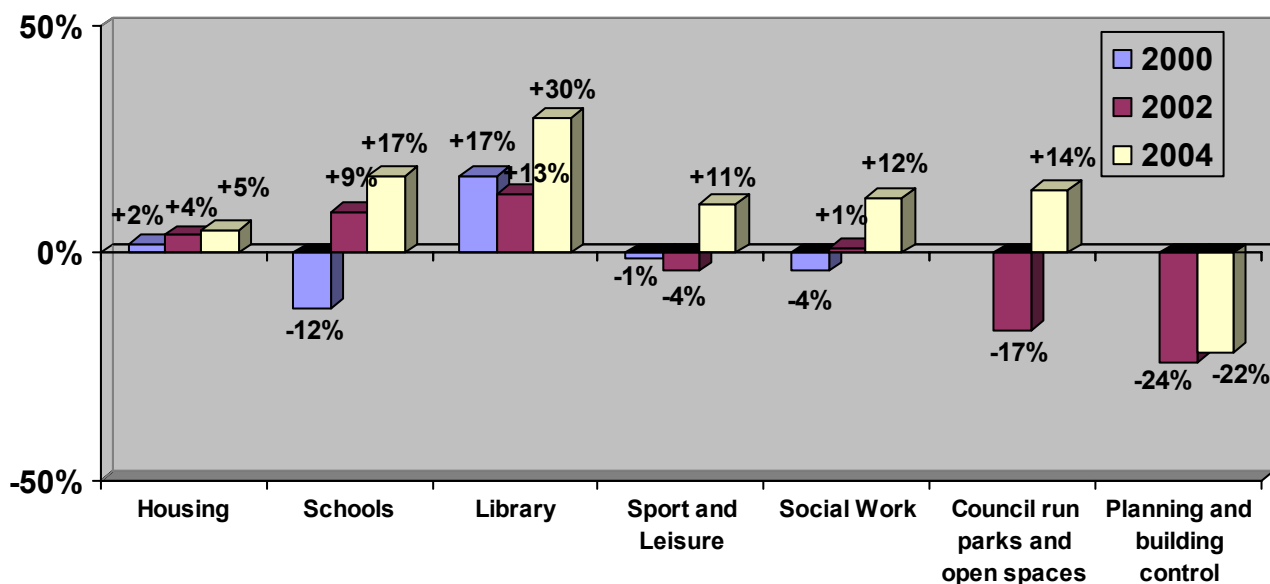
The improved perception of all of these services is noteworthy, although there continues to be scope for further improvement, particularly with regard to roads maintenance and winter gritting, albeit real improved perceptions are apparent.

PERCEIVED CHANGES

7.7 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 perceptions of services, as it does not rely on the sampling methodology for previous years being identical. These questions have been asked in each of 2000, 2002 and 2004 and the results are detailed below (in the case of two questions, Year 2000 data is not available). The calculations are based on the proportion of respondents who believe services have improved, *less* the proportion of respondents who believe they have got worse.

7.8 Results for a number of specific services are summarised below.

Figure 7.4: Pattern Data in Relation to Specific Services

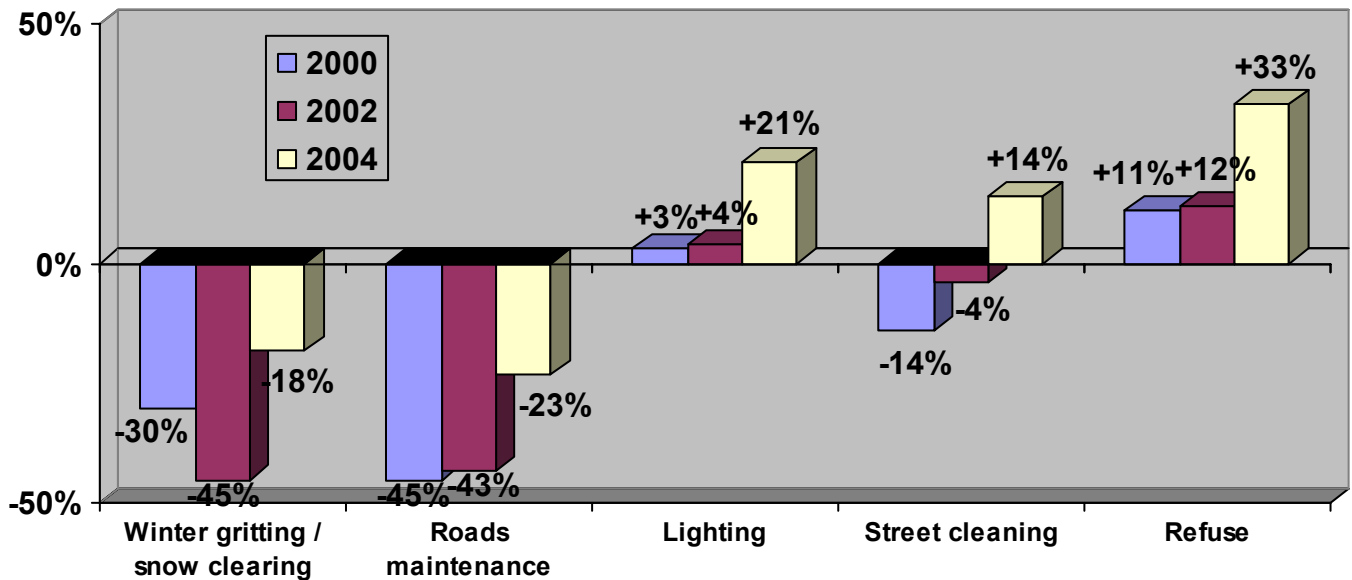


Clearly, almost all of these specific services are perceived to be improving, particularly in the case of services such as libraries and schools.

The exception is “planning and building control” where people perceive the service to be worsening (again, most probably for “policy” reasons).

7.9 A similar analysis for a number of “universal services” is set out below.

Figure 7.5: Pattern Data on Perceived Changes to Universal Services



In general, the proportion of respondents believing services to be improving (in refuse collection, street lighting and street cleaning) is impressive.

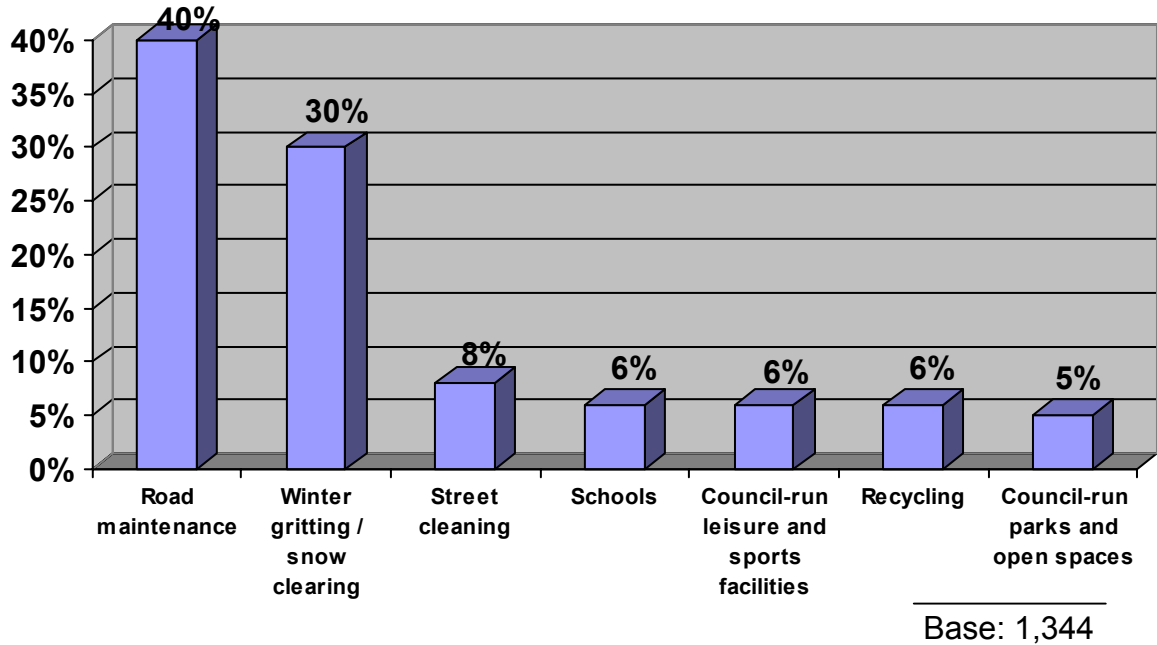
It is still the case, however, that more people believe the roads maintenance and winter gritting/snow clearing services to be worsening than improving. This is something of a paradox in that actual satisfaction with such services has improved over the past two years. In reality, it is likely that these negative views illustrate continued concerns over service delivery in these areas rather than a robust analysis of whether service delivery has improved or worsened over the past few years.

7.10 The table below summarises these perceptions.

Housing	Consistent perception of performance staying the same or improving slightly.
Schools	A continued and impressive positive turnaround in terms of perception of performance.
Libraries	Perceived to be continuing to improve.
Sport and Leisure	A slight downward pattern has been reversed and perceptions are improving.
Social Work	Recent perceived improvement in service delivery.
Council-run parks and open spaces	Now perceived to be improving, representing a significant turnaround.
Planning and building control	Still perceived to be worsening.
Winter gritting/snow clearing	Still perceived to be worsening by some, but to a much lesser extent than previously.
Roads maintenance	A similar pattern to winter gritting/snow clearing.
Street lighting	Now seen to be improving by a significant proportion.
Street cleaning	A continued positive turnaround and now perceived to be improving.
Refuse collection	Many more people now perceive this to be a service which is improving.

7.11 2004 respondents were also asked to suggest on which services they felt the Council should have spent more money in the previous year. The results of this are detailed in Figure 7.8 below (suggestions accounting for more than 5% of the total are included).

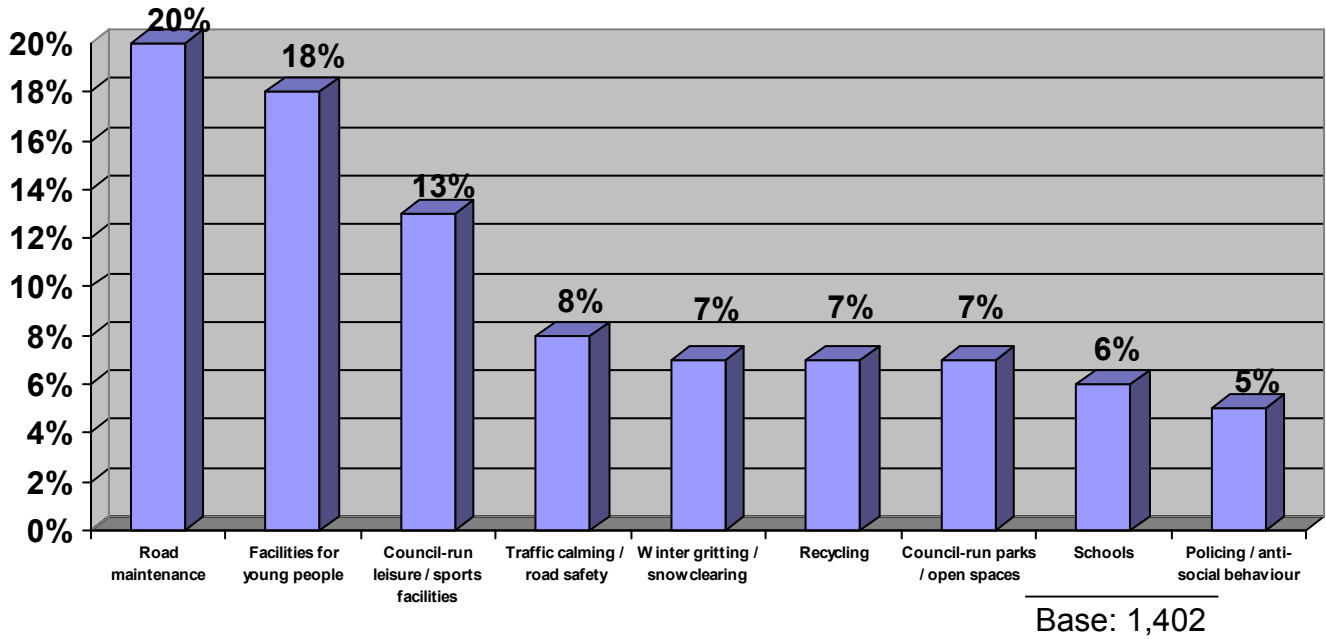
Figure 7.6: On which services should the Council have spent more money last year?



Clearly, the continued concerns over roads maintenance and winter gritting/snow clearing are reflected in these responses.

7.12 The same is true to some degree of suggestions for which services the Council should give priority (again, suggestions accounting for more than 5% of the total are welcomed).

Figure 7.7: What facilities or services should be given priority?



Clearly, road maintenance stands out as an area where residents feel priority should be given.

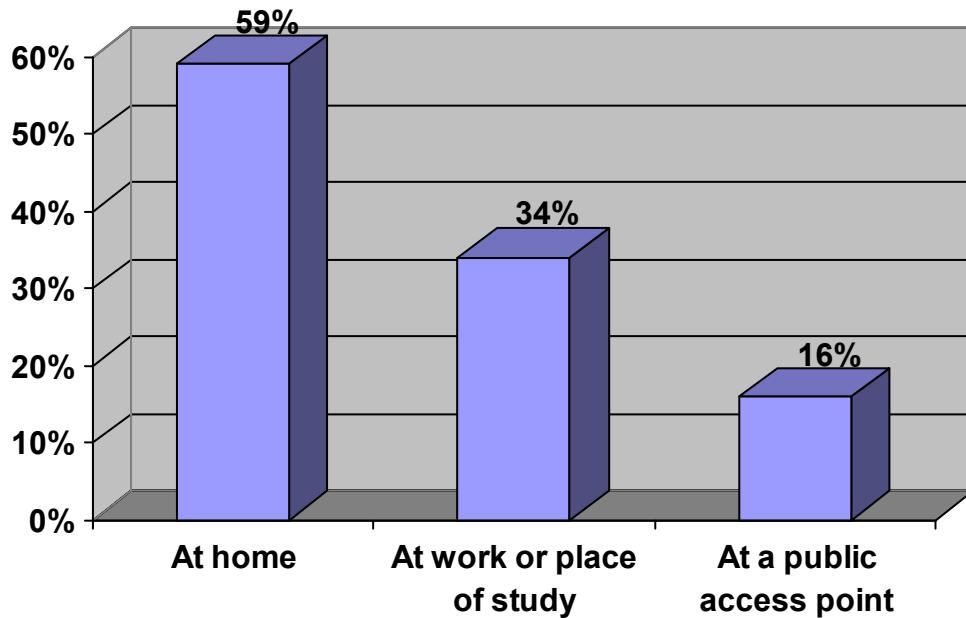
The issue of facilities, particularly for young people, is also prominent amongst these suggestions.

7.13 In general, it is certainly encouraging to note that these suggestions are consistent with issues which the Council has prioritised and where improvements are now being perceived.

8.0 THE INTERNET

8.1 Figure 8.1 profiles current internet access within Aberdeenshire.

Figure 8.1: Internet Access



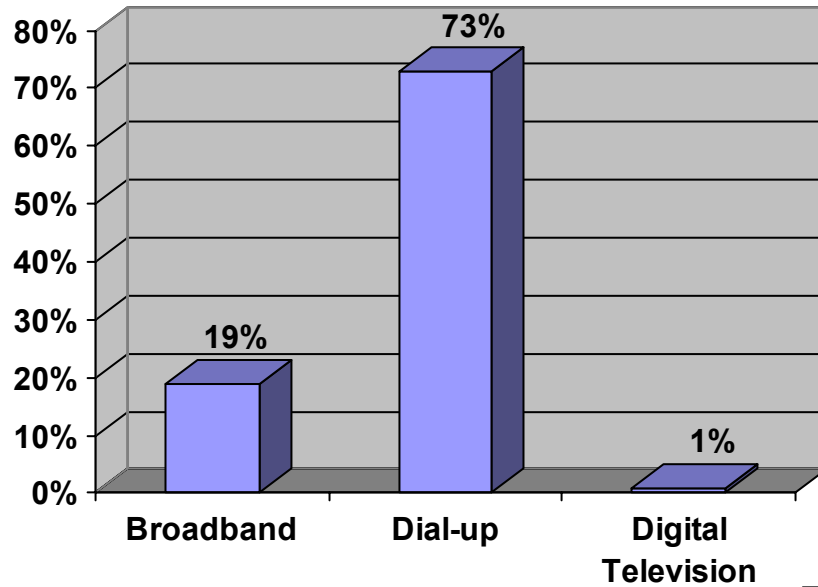
Base: 2,782

The 2002 survey reported home penetration of the internet at 48%, so there has clearly been increased penetration over the past two years.

This level of internet access is also higher than in other Local Authority areas. The Scottish Household Survey (2003 data) reported internet access levels of between 36% and 58% across a range of Local Authority groupings.

8.2 As can be seen from Figure 8.2, most people continue to be connected by a “dial-up” connection, with broadband penetration remaining low throughout Aberdeenshire.

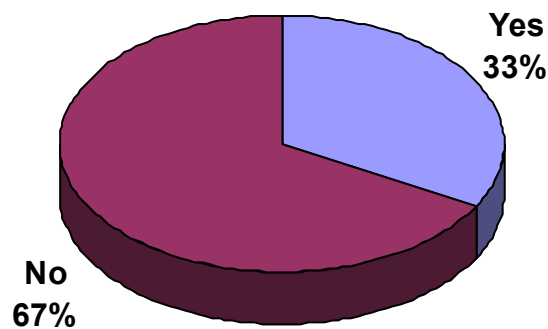
Figure 8.2: Type of Connection (most commonly used for personal business)



Base: 1,856

8.3 33% of people had previously visited the Council’s web site with the highest propensity to visit the site being amongst 25-34 year olds (47%).

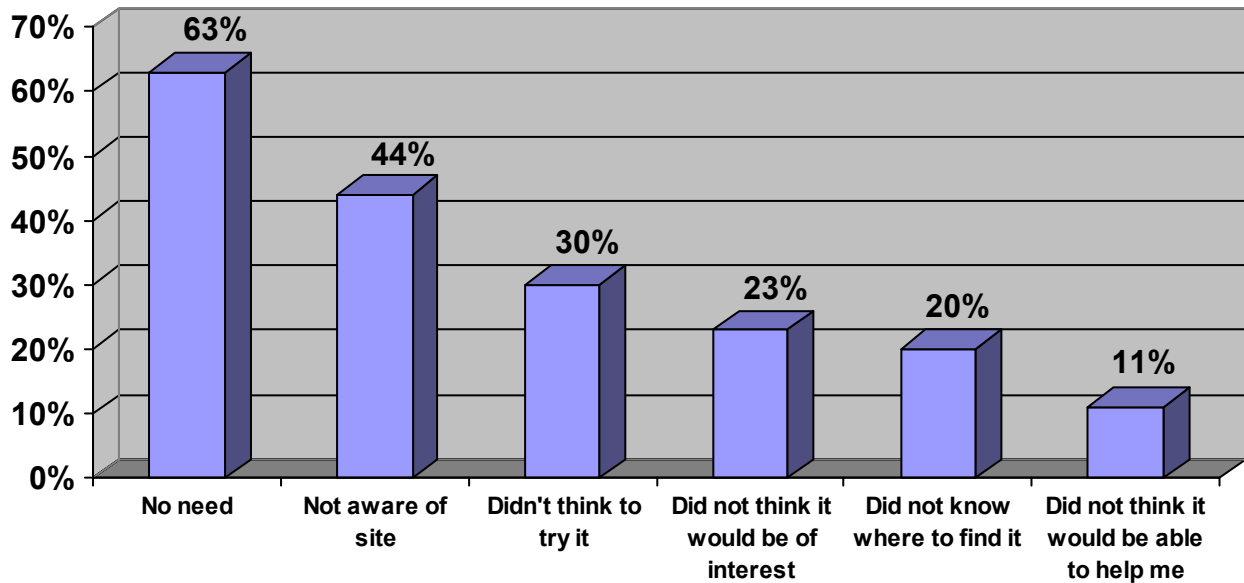
Figure 8.3: Visits to Council Web-Site



All (base: 1,856)

8.4 Individuals' reasons for not visiting the site are set out in Figure 8.4.

Figure 8.4: Reasons for not visiting Council Web-Site



Base: 1,236

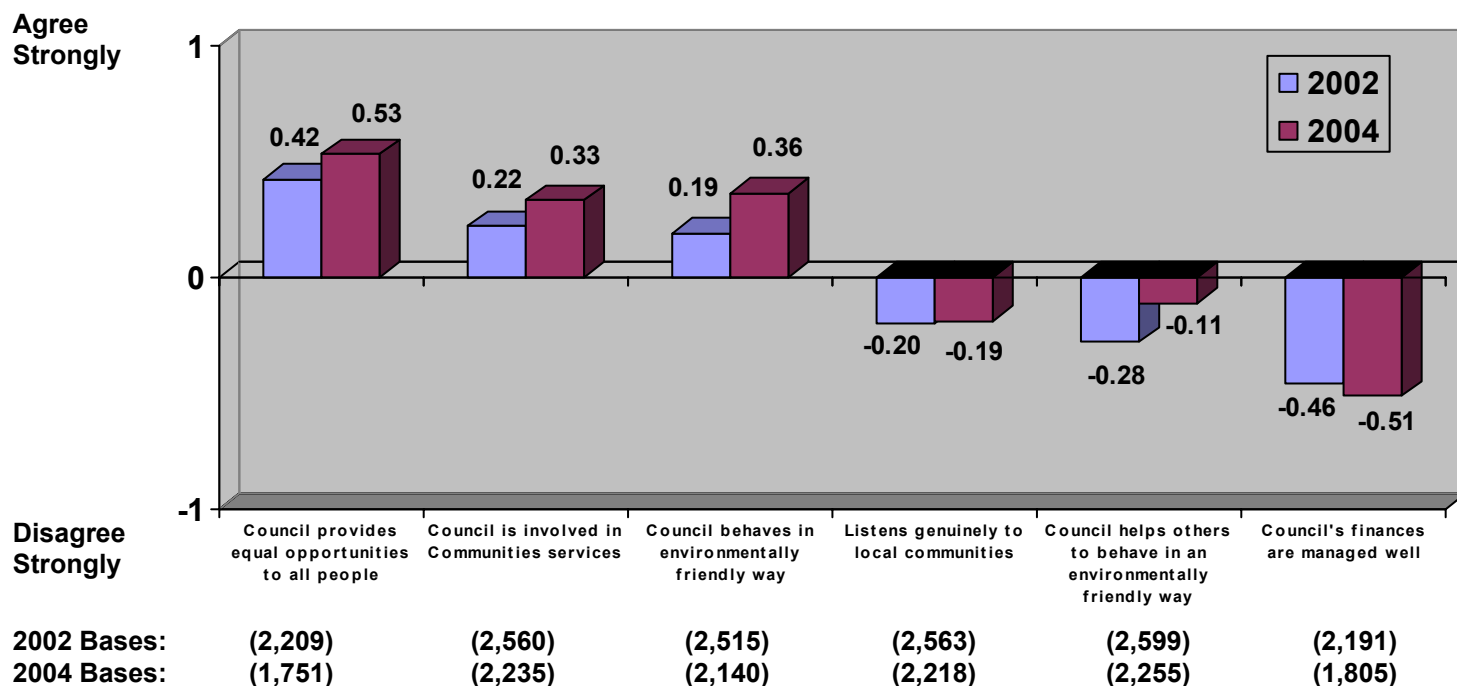
Clearly, very many people do not consider there to be any particular need to visit the site. However, there are also indications of a lack of awareness and, indeed, a lack of understanding of the services which are offered, and could be offered, through the web site. For example, 44% say that they were not aware of the site and 33% "did not think to try it".

It would be reasonable to suggest that continued development of the functionality of the site should be accompanied by effective online and offline promotion of it.

9.0 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

9.1 In 2002 and 2004, respondents were asked a number of questions around the themes of Corporate Social Responsibility. The results of this are illustrated in Figure 9.1 below:

Figure 9.1: Measure of Council as Socially Responsible Organisation



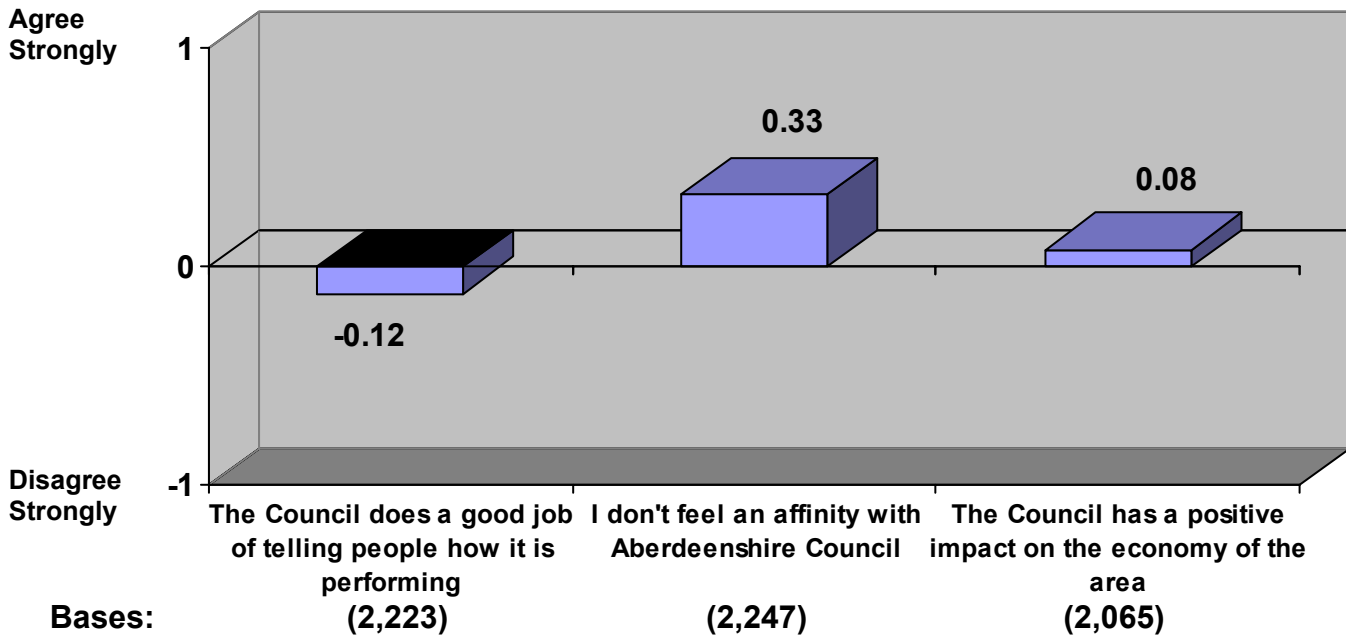
9.2 The following key points may be made:

- Few people now disagree that the Council provides “equal opportunities” to all people (10% disagree compared to 13% in 2002).
- A greater proportion of people now see the Council as “involved in the communities it serves” although there is a high “don’t know” (20%) and neither/nor (27%) response to this question.
- The Council is increasingly perceived to behave in an environmentally friendly way (51% now agree that it does so, compared to 40% in 2002).
- There continues to be real scepticism regarding whether the Council “listens genuinely” to local communities. A majority of those who express an opinion disagree with this statement (25% agree and 40% disagree).
- Whilst a majority still do not believe that the Council does enough to help others to behave in an environmentally friendly way, the pattern is positive (33% believe it does, compared to 23% in 2002).

- There is a very high “don’t know” response of 35% regarding the question of whether the Council’s finances are well managed. There is, however, a continued view that its finances are not well managed. In our view, this reflects negative perceptions of the efficiency of some aspects of Council work, rather than being a comment on the prudence of its financial management.

9.3 A selection of additional questions on matters of social responsibility were posed in 2004, as detailed below:

Figure 9.2: Additional Social Responsibility Questions

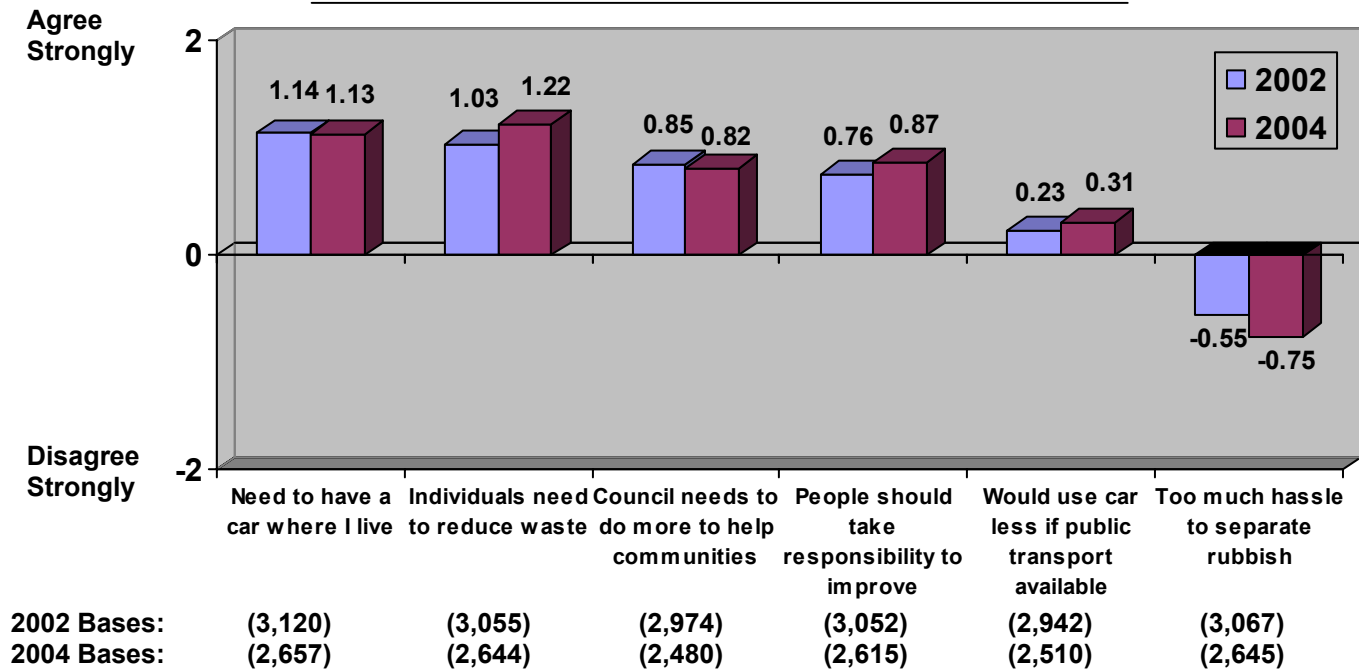


The key points to note here are:

- The view that the Council does not do a good job of telling people how it is performing (only 25% believe it does a good job against 35% who disagree).
- The general agreement with the negative proposition that “I don’t feel an affinity with Aberdeenshire Council” (only 14% disagree with this proposition and therefore say they have an affinity with the Council. Such views are common across the Council area).
- There are also mixed views as to whether the Council has a positive impact on the economy of the area (35% believe it has, but 26% disagree).

9.4 A further element of the social responsibility section related to public attitudes. Responses to a series of attitudinal statements are laid out in Figure 9.3.

Figure 9.3: Social Responsibility – Public Attitudes



9.5 Changes in relation to such attitudes are marginal, though generally positive:

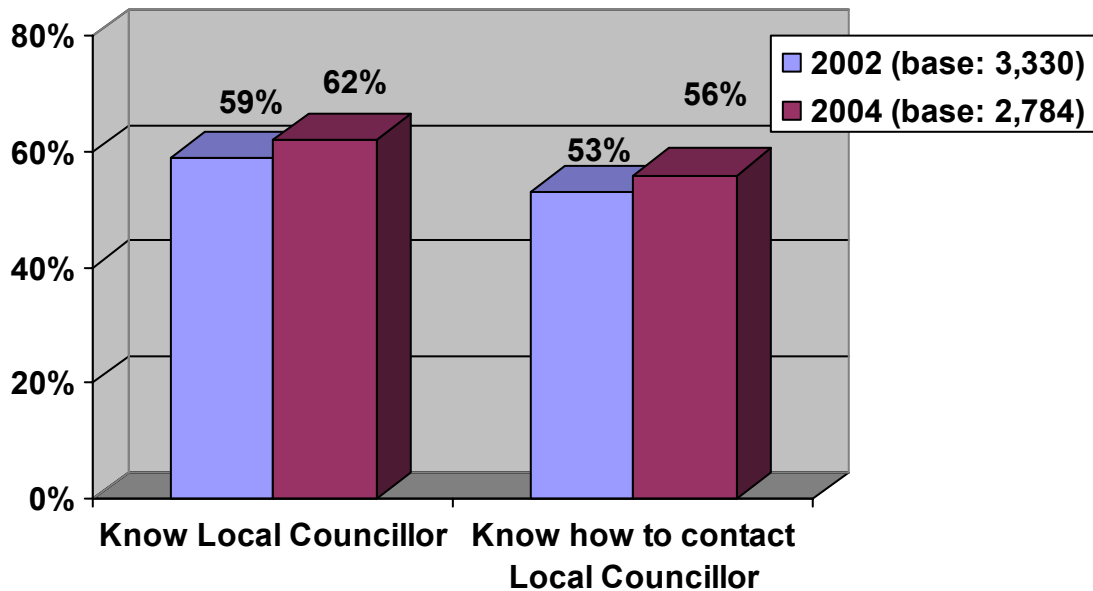
- Most people (81%) continue to feel that they need to have a car where they live.
- There is an increasing acceptance that individuals need to do more to reduce the waste they produce (93% now agree with this compared to 71% in 2002).
- There is still a strong view that the Council should do more to help local communities (71% agreement, compared to 73% agreement in 2002).
- Increased agreement that “people should take more responsibility themselves for improving their local communities” (78% agreement compared to 72% in 2002).
- There continue to be divided views as to whether people would make less use of their car if public transport were available.
- Fewer people now believe that “it is too much hassle to separate out rubbish for recycling (16% compared to 21% in 2002).

9.6 Overall, there are positive signs that the action of the Council, alongside others, is helping to encourage positive environmental awareness and a sense of community responsibility within the communities of Aberdeenshire, which it is hoped will translate into changed behaviour in the future.

10.0 COUNCIL DECISION MAKING

10.1 The final strand of the research related to people's attitudes to Council decision making. Figure 10.1, firstly, summarises individuals' awareness of their local councillor and how to contact him or her.

Figure 10.1: Local Councillors

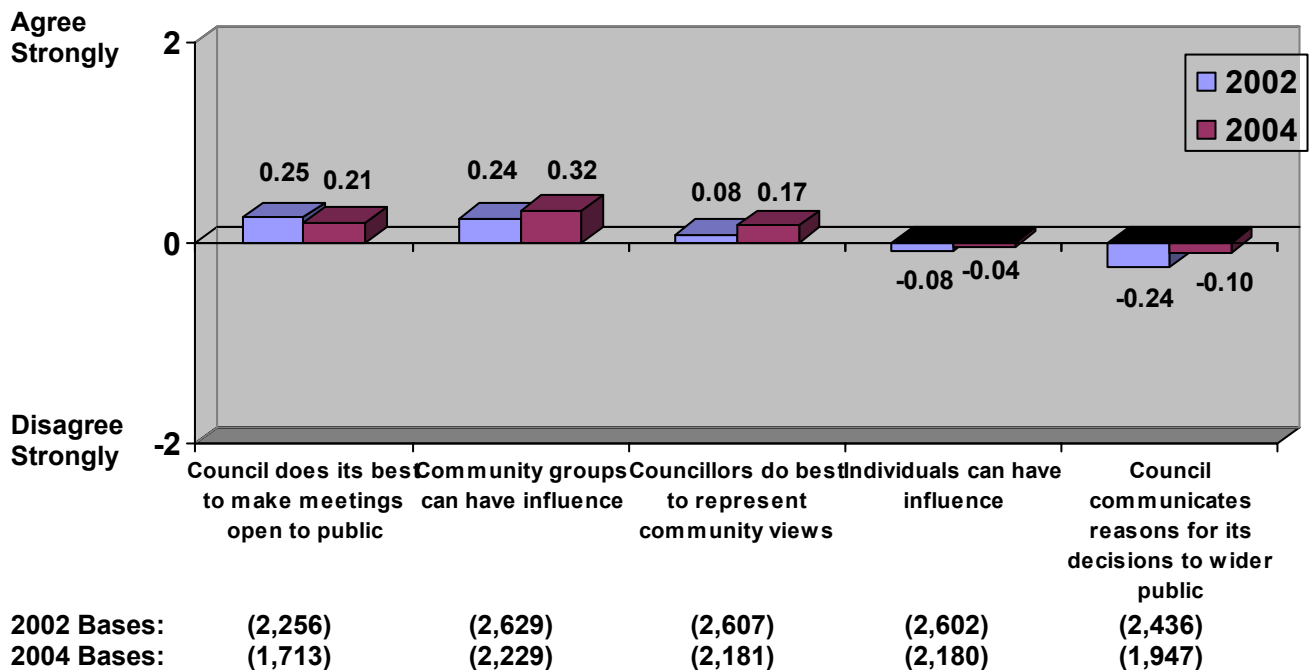


10.2 Overall, the increasing proportion of people who say they know their local councillor is impressive and is well ahead of the 43% most recently quoted by the Scottish Household Survey. These figures are still closely correlated with age (only 28% of 19-24 years olds and 40% of 25-34 year olds say that they know the name of their local councillors). Awareness is highest in Banff and Buchan (71%) and Buchan (67%).

10.3 Despite the positive upward pattern, a significant minority (44%) say they would not know how to contact their local councillor. This rises to 81% amongst 19-24 year olds and 66% amongst 25-34 year olds.

10.4 Attitudes in relation to a number of dimensions of Council decision making are set out below:

Figure 10.2: Council Decision Making



The following key points may be made in relation to these issues:

- There continues to be a general, if lukewarm, acceptance that the Council does indeed do its best to make its meetings open to the public (though there is a 39% “don’t know” response).
- There is a general view that local community groups can have an influence on Council decisions (55% agree compared to 50% in 2002).
- Mixed views continue to be evident as to whether Councillors do their best to represent the views of the local community; however, perceptions are improving (46% now agree with this statement compared to 39% in 2002).
- Opinions continue to be divided regarding whether local individuals can have an influence on Council decisions (38% agree, but 40% disagree).

10.5 The theme of effective two-way communications has been evident throughout this report and in previous surveys. It continues to be a challenge, 37% of people disagree that “the Council communicate the reasons for its decisions to the wider public”. Whilst this is down from 41% disagreement in 2002, it compares to a figure of only 24% who agree with this statement.

11.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

- 11.1 There has been a considerable improvement in the Council's overall net satisfaction rating over the past two years, in relation to its role as a service deliverer. Aberdeenshire residents are now more likely to believe that the Council does a better job than comparable Local Authorities.
- 11.2 Improved ratings are evident across most of the measures considered in the survey. Whilst people who are located further away from Aberdeen are generally less likely to be satisfied with a range of aspects of Council service delivery, this gap is closing.
- 11.3 Some improvements are evident in relation to aspects of contact management within the Council, although these improvements are generally fairly modest. The approach to complaint handling remains a concern.
- 11.4 Improved perceptions are evident with regard to the Council's role in keeping towns and villages tidy and making them attractive places to live. Concerns remain over a perceived lack of community facilities, especially for young people, and in relation to the overall vibrancy of community life.
- 11.5 Residents express strong scepticism concerning the Council's Planning policies and whether these are of overall benefit to the people of Aberdeenshire. A perceived lack of affordable housing (in both the private and public sectors) is a particular concern.
- 11.6 There are generally improved perceptions regarding roads and transportation issues in Aberdeenshire. Whilst those areas continue to be rated negatively, and are seen as a priority for improvement, the extent to which this is the case has diminished and fewer people now consider service performance in these areas to be worsening.
- 11.7 There is strong support in principle for a range of traffic calming measures to be implemented and people believe this should be a priority for the Council. There are some concerns as to the effective consultation prior to implementation of such schemes and the extent of community consultation as to their implementation.
- 11.8 The pattern in satisfaction with individual Services is very positive. Services such as schools and libraries retain their high ratings and services such as parks and open spaces and leisure facilities show improvements.

- 11.9 The Planning and Building Control service continues to be rated negatively, although it may be that this is a reflection on perceptions of policy rather than day to day service delivery.
- 11.10 Increases in satisfaction across many of the Council's "universal" services are particularly noteworthy. This applies, for example, to street lighting, street cleaning and refuse collection.
- 11.11 Perhaps even more encouragingly, respondents are now more likely than before to believe that services are improving. This is particularly the case in schools, libraries, refuse collection, street lighting and street cleaning.
- 11.12 Roads maintenance and winter gritting/snow clearing continue to be rated negatively. However, significant improvements in perception are evident in comparison with previous surveys.
- 11.13 Internet Access (at home) in Aberdeenshire has now reached 60%, although this is mainly through dial-up connections. Awareness and understanding of the potential of the Council's web site as a communications tool, and a vehicle for service delivery, is fairly limited.
- 11.14 Across a range of indicators of environmental and social responsibility, the Council is now more positively rated than it was previously. Importantly, there are also signs of improved environmental awareness and a stronger sense of social responsibility amongst the population at large.
- 11.15 Many people still say they would not know how to contact their local councillor. There remains some scepticism as to whether the Council is genuinely interested in communicating and engaging with the communities it serves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.16 As noted previously, it is important that the survey findings are considered fully at all levels of the Council and that improvement actions can then be adopted. However, we believe it is appropriate at this stage to make some interim recommendations for the Council to consider.

These interim recommendations are as follows:

- The approach of decentralising the front-end of service delivery to as local a level as possible should be fostered, balancing this with cost concerns. There should be further investigation of how a greater local level affinity with the Council can be fostered.

- The Council's approach to the handling of complaints should be reviewed, having regard to the recording and reporting of such complaints and ensuring effective feedback when actions have been implemented.
- A full review of community facilities should be instituted, perhaps in conjunction with Community Planning partners, to explore how improvements can be made in this area.
- There should be further investigation of the detailed reasons for concern over the implementation of Council Planning policies and what can be done about this.
- Specifically, the Council should consider what it can do, along with others, to ensure the affordability of housing within Aberdeenshire.
- Where possible, a prioritisation of resources towards the improvement of roads and road maintenance in Aberdeenshire should be continued.
- Traffic calming schemes should be given priority and be aggressively pursued, whilst seeking to ensure their effective implementation in partnership with local communities.
- The Council should continue efforts to promote a "compact" between itself and local communities with respect to issues of environmental awareness and social responsibility.
- The Council should consider in detail its approach to communicating with the communities it serves, including issues of Performance Reporting and engagement with democratic processes. The Council's web site should be reviewed as part of this process.

These interim recommendations are presented for further discussion with the Council and its Senior Management Team.