

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL 2005 RESIDENTS SURVEY

SUMMARY REPORT

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ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL 2005 RESIDENTS SURVEY

Executive Summary

Background

This report sets out the findings of the qualitative research undertaken by IBP Strategy and Research, on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council. The assignment had three broad aims:

- To identify effective communications approaches which would assist the Council to improve its image and reputation amongst Aberdeenshire residents.
- To identify how customer service activity could best be developed to have a positive impact on residents' perception of the Council.
- To recommend an appropriate approach for the Council to take with respect to its Public Performance Reporting.

Summary of Recommendations

The main recommendations arising from the research are as follows:-

Image and Reputation

Recommendation 1

It is recommended that the Council adopts a set of clear and consistent core messages that are threaded through all aspects of the Council's communications, which include publications and the web, but also through the messages sent out by people delivering services.

Recommendation 2

The Council should consider how it can enhance the visibility of its key decision makers within local communities in Aberdeenshire. This applies both to Council Officers and Members.

Recommendation 3

In particular, consideration should be given to bringing in a cross-party **Communication Code of Conduct** for elected members which would set out minimum standards to which they would be expected to adhere with regard to issues such as communication with constituents and availability for surgeries, as well as response times to written and e-mail enquiries.

Recommendation 4

There are a number of ways that people can contact the Council. The research has identified that these are not as well known as the Council might believe. The Council should more proactively promote the ways people can contact its Officers and Members. In particular, this could include;

- A “contact us” line on stationery and other publications
- Posters in local offices.

In all cases appropriate response standards should be in place and be monitored.

Recommendation 5

Detailed communication strategies should be put in place to explain all the Council’s key policies and strategies, e.g.

- The Council’s Planning policies
- Closure and rationalisation of facilities
- Winter gritting.

These should focus on the options which the Council has available to it and the rationale which it has adopted for its chosen options.

Recommendation 6

There is a perception that year-end expenditure is based on a “use it or lose it” philosophy. The Council’s communications strategy should address these negative perceptions.

Recommendation 7

Specifically, the Council should continue to engage effectively with staff that are most visible in terms of service delivery to develop a set of behavioural standards and principles, and encourage their adoption, so as to promote the key values/messages which we have described above.

Customer Service and Operational Communications

Recommendation 8

Over time, the Council should undertake an audit of its key services against the key segmentation criteria of:

- Automated services

- One-way services
- Two-way contact with limited, non-specialised interaction
- Two-way services where a greater degree of interaction is required but which are not complex or specialised
- Two-way contact with a high degree of complexity or specialisation.

The current method of delivering these services should then be mapped against the preferred nature of service provision described herein. It is recognised that this will be a long-term process.

Recommendation 9

The Council should undertake an internal exercise to review and simplify its existing Customer Service Code of Conduct, placing emphasis on the key service attributes described herein. An additional component of this should be agreement of a set of standards for “keeping in touch” which would address issues such as: provision of named contacts, communication of timescales for service delivery, circumstances where “update” communications are required and services where specific feedback opportunities should be given. These standards need to be agreed in principle across all Services whilst the specifics can vary from service to service. Whilst this process may be complete, for internal purposes, within a year or so, the standards should be “bedded in” prior to their external communication.

Recommendation 10

The need for appropriate training to deliver on these service attributes should be integrated, as a matter of course, into the Council’s existing processes for identifying and acting upon training needs.

Recommendation 11

We believe that it would be appropriate for the Council to develop and publish a Directory of Council Services, which would set out details of Services, what they do and how they can be contacted (by telephone, face-to-face or online means). In terms of its initial publication (realistically, 2006) it may be appropriate for this document to form half of an overall document, with the other half comprising the “Gateway” Public Performance Report as described in Recommendation 15.

Recommendation 12

The Council should identify a specific area to pilot a satellite “local office” and should bring forward plans to re-orient service provision in this way. The plans for such services should be for a regularly staffed operation, in a locally-accessible venue, with defined service provision in terms of information provision, applications and financial transactions.

Recommendation 13

The Council should develop a promotional programme to communicate the potential for people to access services through the web. As well as using the communications methods described herein, a range of other online and offline methods should be used for this.

Recommendation 14

The opportunities for citizens to provide general feedback to the Council should be simplified and streamlined, including two specific actions:

- Shorten and simplify "Tell Us What You Think" and agree standards for its availability and distribution.
- Give consideration to making an on-line option of this available.

In documents such as the proposed Directory of Council Services, and PPR-related documents, the methods to provide feedback should be promoted as a matter of course

Public Performance Reporting

Recommendation 15

It is proposed that the Council adopt a three-level approach to its Public Performance Reporting: i.e.

- Level 1 Annual Report
- Level 2 Local Council Area Newspapers
- Level 3 Detailed service information and reports.

The opportunities set out in Level 3 should be promoted in both the Annual Report/Directory of Services and the Local Council Newspaper, as well as other Council communication channels.

Recommendation 16

As noted above, we recommend that the PPR information should be communicated alongside Service information in the form of a joint Directory of Services/Public Performance Report, at least in the first year (i.e. publication in 2006). At this stage, we envisage that the most cost-effective way of achieving this will be through dissemination alongside Council Tax demands.

Recommendation 17

We recommend that there be a rolling programme of “Local Council Newspapers” which would be published at the level of the six administrative areas and which would include information on Council performance and plans within that area. The frequency of publication is partly influenced by cost constraints, but we would suggest that each area should have such a publication at least once annually.

Recommendation 18

The Council should agree a list of reports, which it will proactively make available. These should generally reflect reports which are already produced in some format (e.g. for external stakeholders such as the Scottish Executive). These reports should be made available on www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk, as well as being made available in all Council libraries and selected Council Offices. Individual facilities should be communicated with to ensure that the agreed list of documents is made available. This is expected to be a progressive process taking up to 18 months for its full implementation.

Recommendation 19

The Council should adopt an agreed list of standards for all elements of its Public Performance Reporting and set a date in the future for their achievement, so that they can be implemented progressively. The standards should reflect those described herein:

- Providing a “Gateway” document but also linking this into more detailed information, including use of the web
- Clear design, using bright colours and graphics
- Use of plain language (and taking account of other accessibility issues such as print size and language requirements)
- Keeping costs down
- Accepting advertising but only if this keeps costs down (when the cost of sourcing that advertising is taken into account)
- Ensuring a “warts and all” report
- Making information as “local” as practical.

Next Steps

The issues described herein are challenging and are long-term in nature. There are no quick fixes and any changes will take time to feed through to public perceptions. This said, actions can commence immediately. It is therefore proposed that the Public and Employee Survey Team (PEST), along with relevant Council Officers, develop a timetabled Action Plan for implementation of these recommendations.

Good practice would suggest that the research findings, along with the core of the Action Plan, be fed back to research participants. It is therefore proposed to do this in two ways.

Firstly, by issue of a Summary Report and secondly through an “Open Night” for participants. Plans for this “Open Night” should be put in place as soon as the outline of the Action Plan has been agreed.

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL 2005 RESIDENTS SURVEY MAIN REPORT

1.0 BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Communications with citizens and service users was identified as a key theme in the Aberdeenshire Council 2004 Residents Survey. This issue has a number of elements.

Firstly, the previous research has suggested that perceptions of the Council, its service provision and overall performance were sometimes based on a flawed understanding of the real situation within the Council. The Council's Scrutiny and Audit Committee noted the need to:

"Provide information about the Council and its activities to counter cynical and negative perceptions of local government".

More generally, previous research had also suggested that there was sometimes an underlying lack of "affinity" with the Council as an entity.

- 1.2 A central element of "communications" is the contact, which the Council has with residents in the delivery of its services; these contacts are potentially the key points at which residents form a view, positive or negative, of the Council. These contacts can involve personal contact (for example, when the individual is the direct recipients of a service) or be impersonal (for example, when a resident is seeking information from the Phone Book about how to access services). These "contacts" and thus, opportunities for residents to form a view of the Council, can also be indirect. An example of this would be residents noticing Council staff working on roads or street lighting maintenance.

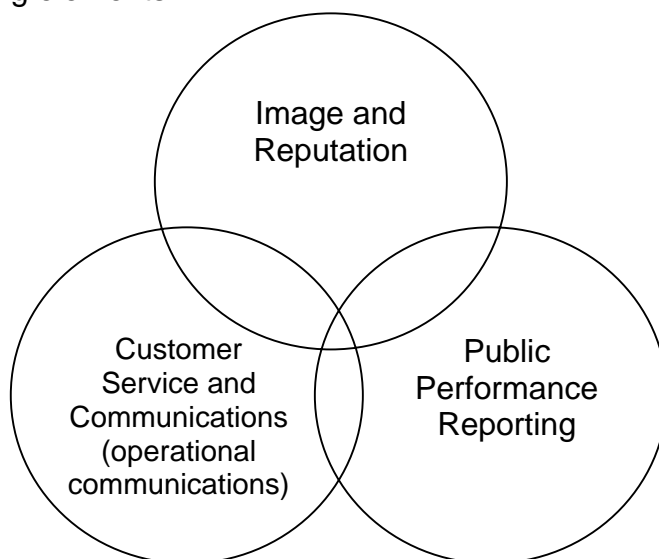
- 1.3 "Public Performance Reporting" is a particular element of the communications challenge facing the Council. As the Scrutiny and Audit Committee noted:

"Informed citizens are essential for participative democracy to work".

The Council has a statutory duty to provide information to its various stakeholders, which is relevant to them, and to publish this information in a manner, and at time, which is suitable for them.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 1.4 Based on the above, the Council commissioned IBP to deliver a programme of in-depth, qualitative research which had three interlocking elements:



The assignment had three broad aims:

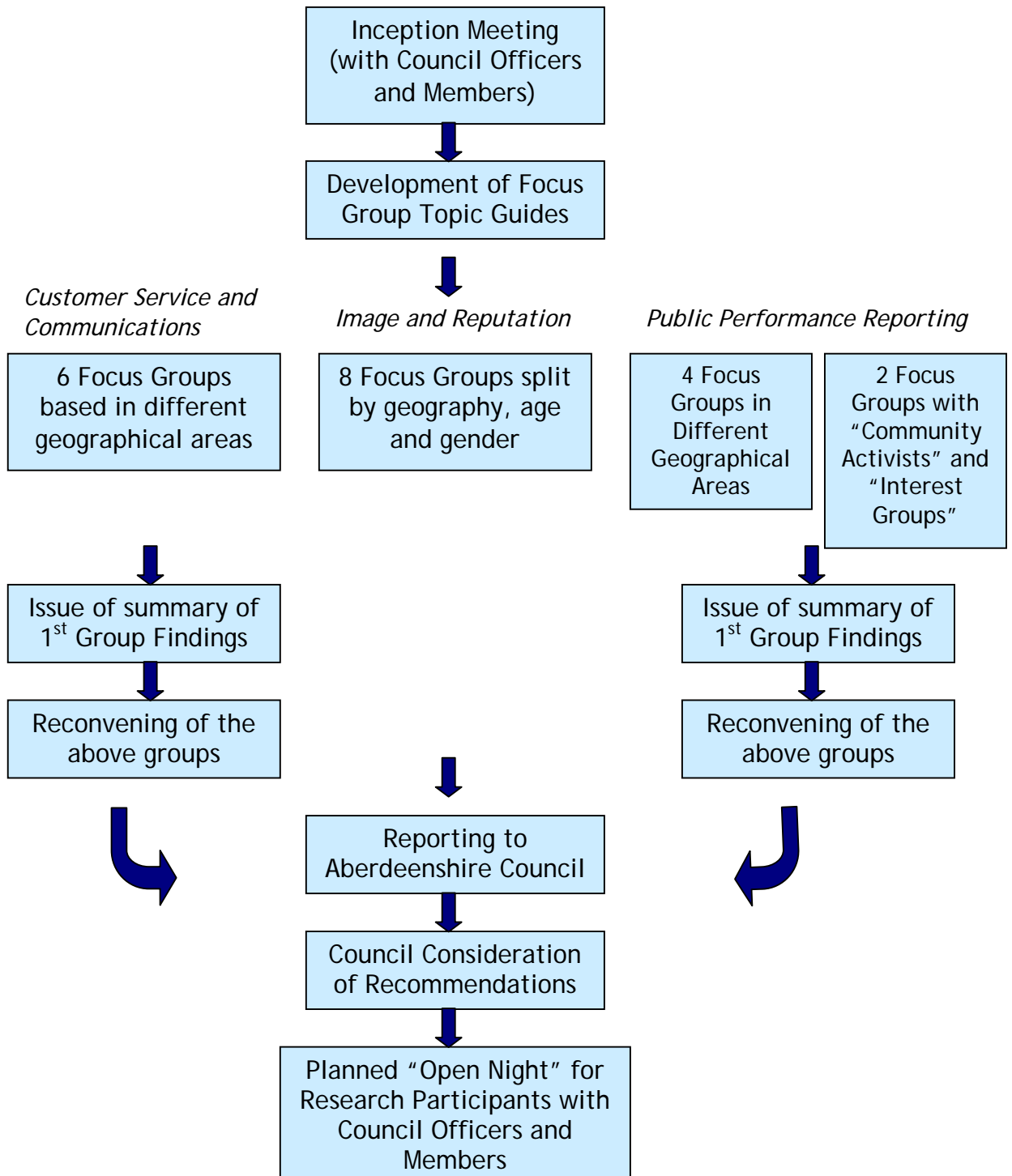
- To identify effective communications approaches which would assist the Council to improve its image and reputation amongst Aberdeenshire residents.
- To identify how customer service activity could best be developed to have a positive impact on residents' perception of the Council.
- To recommend an appropriate approach for the Council to take with respect to its Public Performance Reporting.

Each of the three elements has their own specific research objectives which are detailed in the relevant section of the report.

METHODOLOGY

1.5 The “Image and Reputation” element of the work was pursued through a programme of eight one-off focus groups, covering different geographical locations and age groups. Due to the added complexity of the “Customer Service” and “Public Performance Reporting” themes, a more involved process was adopted. This involved a “working group” approach whereby participants were invited to an initial focus group and then a subsequent group, in order to discuss their views and priorities in greater detail.

This methodology is summarised below:



Almost 200 residents in total took part in the programme of focus groups and working groups. The initial groups were hosted in June and July 2005, with the follow-up groups taking place in late-August and early-September.

- 1.6 This document summarises the key findings for each strand of the work and goes on to set out a number of recommendations for the Council's consideration. A more detailed report has also been produced which goes into further depth regarding the issues raised in the groups.

It is understood that Council Officers and Members will review the findings of this report and its recommendations and consider their response to them. As noted above, it is then proposed to convene an "open night" to enable Officers and Members to feed back the results of the consultation, and possible future plans, to participants.

2.0 IMAGE AND REPUTATION

OBJECTIVES

2.1 The specific objectives set for this element of the assignment were as follows:

- To identify the desired values which people feel should be associated with a local authority.
- To determine the current position of the Aberdeenshire Council “image and reputation” in relation to these values.
- To determine how people form their views of the Council, whether these views are positive or negative.
- Specifically, to determine what could be done to reduce any perception of “remoteness” of the Council.
- To identify specific examples of both good and bad practice in relation to communications on the part of public and private sector organisations and thus to determine the lessons which arise from this for the Council.
- To similarly identify specific examples of good and bad practice within the Council itself.
- To determine the role which Council' employees can play in communicating with stakeholders.
- To determine the most effective methods for the Council to consult with, explain its decisions, report on performance and communicate these to the people of Aberdeenshire (recognising that there is a crossover into the Public Performance Reporting element of the work).

2.2 It is important at the outset to draw a distinction between “image and reputation”. Cambridge Dictionaries defines “corporate image” thus:

“The way in which a company is seen and understood by people in general”.

This can be influenced by a variety of factors which include people’s experiences but also other aspects of corporate communications including publications, premises and so on.

“Reputation” is defined thus:

“The opinion that people in general have about someone or something, or how much respect or admiration someone or something receives, based on past behaviour or character”.

“Reputation” is, therefore, more directly influenced by people’s prior experiences, whether directly, or indirectly shared between people.

FINDINGS

- 2.3 It is important to note, at the outset, that most of the focus group participants we spoke to did not see their identity as being part of Aberdeenshire. For some, particularly older people, there was a stronger sense of identity with former councils such as Banff and Buchan, Gordon or Kincardine and Deeside. For those living in places such as Westhill, which are adjacent to Aberdeen City, they are more likely to see themselves as part of a “Greater Aberdeen” rather than Aberdeenshire.
- 2.4 This said, when pressed, participants were able to identify some common descriptors or “values” associated with the rural parts of North East Scotland. For example:
- Pristine countryside and clean air
 - Unspoiled towns and villages
 - A strong sense of Scottish heritage (whisky, Balmoral etc.).

Some of the positive values associated with Aberdeenshire’s people were described thus:

- *“Friendly”* and *“Neighbourly”*
- *“Easy going”* and *“unhurried”*.

This was accompanied by some less positive perceptions:

- *“Moody”*
- *“Cynical”*.

When focus group participants were asked to comment on the values associated with the Aberdeenshire people, “frugal” was a common response, although this should not necessarily be seen as negative. This is a key value to which the Council’s communications need to tap in.

2.5 For most people, their image of the Council is based on the things they see such as “yellow vans” and “people cutting the grass”. Most people don’t really think of the breadth of Services offered by the Council and they don’t see the Council as having a particular identity or figurehead with which they can associate.

The Aberdeenshire Council logo is well recognised but is perceived to be somewhat bland and bureaucratic. It does not really reflect the values described above. This said, there would be considerable antipathy to a wholesale rebranding of the Council, this reflects the frugality (or search for Value for Money) noted above.

2.6 It is worth noting that the most common anecdotal observations, which people used to justify their assertion that the Council offered poor value for money, were based on what they saw of Council workers, such as those working on roads or transport maintenance. The stereotype of too many workers on a particular job was one about which many participants were forthright in communicating their own specific experiences.

2.7 The examples given in the focus groups of organisations which were “admired” give a sense of what people might look for in their local Council.

Table 2.1: Selected Admired Organisations

Organisation	Reason for admiration
Council libraries	<i>“They have a “local touch” and are helpful”</i>
Charity shops	<i>“Good people with an honest intent”</i>
Tesco	<i>“Well trained staff”</i>
“Smile” Bank	<i>“Its an online bank with 24-hour service and you can use it at the Post Office”</i>
“Dial a Bus”	<i>“It is a community service and does what it says it will do”</i>
“Credit Union”	<i>“Local and friendly face”</i>
Mobile phone companies (especially amongst young people)	<i>“Cool” advertising and they “are always giving you offers”</i>
Royal Bank of Scotland	<i>“Professional and attentive to customers needs”</i>

2.8 The above examples were used to inform a discussion as to the things which people would value in their local Council. We believe that five key themes can be discerned from these discussions:

- Being seen as local and having an involvement in the community
- A strong public service ethos
- A real commitment to providing quality customer service

- Treating everyone fairly
- Trying to get the best Value for Money.

2.9 Some positive perceptions of the Council were apparent:

“Just get on doing their job in the background”

“They seem to deliver good services”

“They come in for unfair criticism”.

2.10 However, some of the negative perceptions included:

- A sense that the Council was too centralised
- A lack of an obvious “face of the Council”
- A belief that some of the more remote areas were forgotten about
- A view that it sometimes took a long time for things to get done.

2.11 As people don't think the Council has a very high profile, often they generally held neutral views and certainly did not have strong views about the Council. Sometimes, people actually lumped Aberdeenshire Council together with neighbouring Local Authorities and the negative perceptions they had were actually based on experiences of these neighbouring authorities.

Negative perceptions usually derived from very specific circumstances relating to things like:

- The granting, or refusal, of planning permission
- Closure or rationalisation of Council facilities
- Problems of winter gritting.

Quite a number of people also made reference to the Council seeking to spend its budget at the end of the year and felt that this did not send out a message that the Council was seeking value for Council Tax payer's money.

However, some people also felt that local newspapers' coverage of the Council was not always fair.

- 2.12 At the moment, the Council is seen as remote by quite a lot of people because many services are delivered from areas that, although, within Aberdeenshire, are quite some distance from their home. There is a lack of understanding of “*who does what*” within the Council and people would like to see a much more local focus for the delivery of services, ideally in the form of “*one stop shops*”. This was particularly the case in larger communities, which did not currently see themselves as having a “*local office*” and which were often relatively far from such offices (e.g. Alford, Huntly, Laurencekirk). People did, however, recognise the problems of achieving this cost-effectively in an area as big as Aberdeenshire.
- 2.13 Very mixed experiences and perceptions of the role of Councillors were apparent. In some of the groups, particularly in the smaller settlements, quite a number of people felt that their Councillor was very visible and this perception was often aided by their use of local newsletters. However, this was not always the case and, in the larger settlements in particular, quite a number of people wished to see greater visibility of Councillors: “*a face you recognise in Tesco*”.
- 2.14 The focus groups tested out a number of issues and hypotheses, relating to the perception of remoteness. The outcomes of these discussions is summarised below:

Issue/Hypotheses	Comment
Location of Head Office	This is not always known and, even when it is, is not a major driver of the sense of remoteness. The “remoteness” is about distance from a “local” office and confusion over the location from which services are delivered.
Awareness of Area Committees and Area Managers	This awareness is very low and does not really impact on the sense of remoteness. For many people, their community is not seen as the administrative area, but the specific settlement.
Geographical distance in general	Distance from the most local Council Office (from which a range of services could be delivered) contributes strongly to the sense of remoteness in some communities.
Experience of office closures	Amongst middle aged and older people, there is a strong sense of service points/offices having been taken away from their area since local government re-organisation and this certainly has an impact. There was only limited conception of the need for a trade-off between “locality” and “efficiency”.

- 2.15 Council publications had little impact on its image or reputation. There was little recognition of any publications other than the Council Tax Information Leaflet and this was not well used. The limited degree of regular communication was seen as contributing to the sense of the Council being remote.

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

- 2.16 The following summary observations may be made with regard to the objectives established for the “Image and Reputation” aspect of the assignment:

Objective	Comments
Identify desired values	The key desired values are value for money, locality of delivery, fairness, a public service ethos and commitment to excellent personal customer service.
Determine current position of Aberdeenshire Council	The picture at present is best described as inconsistent (ranging from the very good to the very poor) across all of these issues. A number of people are neutral as they don't have any strong sense of what the Council is about and don't understand its range of services.
Determine how people form their views	In general, views are formed through a gradual build-up of small experiences e.g. what people see of Council workers, press coverage, word of mouth and gossip within local communities. Expressly negative views tend to arise from a narrow range of circumstances relating to planning issues, changes of facilities, winter gritting and the perception of “use it or lose it” budgeting. Negative views do <u>not</u> generally arise from the delivery of services to individuals directly.
Determine what could be done to reduce remoteness	A combination of approaches is required which include more locality of service access and greater visibility of senior decision makers within the Council.
Identify examples of good practice within the Council	Many of the good examples identified reflected the desire for locality and a public service ethos. However, they also illustrate some desire for adoption of modern technology.
Identify examples of poor practice within the Council	Many of the poor examples identified were about perception rather than reality. Some limited instances of service failures were identified which had a negative impact, but only to a limited extent.
Determine the role which Council employees can play	Behaviours of Council staff that are visible to the general public play a major role in forming perceptions and these can often be negative.
Determine cost-effective methods for explaining decisions and performance	This is covered in detail in the section on PPR, but the need for a perception of “frugality” in terms of costs should be noted.

3.0 CUSTOMER SERVICE AND OPERATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 The specific objectives for this element of the assignment were as follows:
- To determine the main reasons for residents making contact with Aberdeenshire Council and the methods used in these different circumstances.
 - To establish how these services are accessed currently.
 - To map out the “cycle of service” for key service scenarios.
 - To determine the desired service attributes which service users have at each stage of this cycle, having regard to:
 - The communication of service availability
 - Different methods of accessing elements of the service (face-to-face, telephone, online, text messaging).
 - To identify any gaps between client expectations and the current approach to service delivery.
 - To determine the response of members of the public to different models of service delivery and associated ideas.
 - To identify the key issues to be taken into account in the communication of service accessibility (e.g. assessment of communications material such as leaflets and advertisements).

FINDINGS

3.2 In the initial groups, it was interesting to note that comparatively few people perceived themselves as actually having had contact with “the Council”. This reflects research carried out by the Scottish Household Survey in 2002, which suggested that the overall level of contact within Aberdeenshire for selected Council Services was only 27%.

3.3 In the initial focus groups the most common contacts related to enquiries about:

- Planning issues
- Waste disposal services
- Roads and lighting enquiries (e.g. reporting a fault)
- Council Tax enquiries
- Contact with the Council’s Housing service.

People actually have lots of contacts with Council Services (e.g. Libraries, Schools, Leisure Centres, etc) but they don’t always see this as having contact with “the Council”.

3.4 Whatever contact method is chosen, the most important thing for people was *getting quickly to the right person* who could help them with their enquiry.

Most people felt that telephone contact was most appropriate for almost any initial enquiry (although some people wanted to have access to physical offices, even for initial enquiries). For some types of contact, telephone would be the only method needed (for example, if people just needed some basic information or to report a fault, say).

However, even when telephone was the preferred method of contact, people still wanted to have access to office facilities to deal with more complex issues (like applying for planning permission) and to get things done when they felt that their issue had not been sorted out by a telephone call.

As illustrated below, the web was seen as an appropriate form of contact, in some circumstances, by some people, although they would generally wish it to be an “option” and not the only way they could communicate. Almost no participants, even those younger people who took part in the research, saw contact through text messaging as being of value to them.

3.5 This analysis was taken further in the follow-up groups where people were asked to comment on their preferred method of contact with respect to a range of scenarios. This is illustrated in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1: Analysis of Approaches to Selected Service Encounters

Scenario	Telephone	Face-to-face	Web	Text Messaging
Reporting faults in roads and street lighting	Generally preferred method	Could be used occasionally if office was available	Would be used by some but reassurance would be required that the issue was registered	Would be acceptable to a small number of, mainly younger, people, but not seen as their preferred method.
Applying for concessionary travel	Would use to source forms and initial information	Would like to have forms available in Council Offices or, preferably Post Offices	Some would use to download forms	Not seen as appropriate
Making planning applications	Would be used for initial contact / getting forms	Needed, due to complexity of issue and "getting things done"	Useful for information and forms	Not seen as appropriate
Organising pick-up of bulky refuse	Generally preferred method	Could be used occasionally if office was available	Would be used by some but reassurance would be required that the issue was registered	Not seen as appropriate
Council Tax enquiry	Generally preferred method	Could be used occasionally if office was available	Would be used by some but reassurance would be required that the issue was registered	Not seen as appropriate
Paying your Council Tax	Most payment by electronic means but some people still desire a physical location.			
Applying for Community Education Course	Perception that these should be published widely (and not just to include Council-run courses). The web would be used to access information and applications, but should not be the only source.			

Reporting a Council Housing repair	Generally preferred method	Could be used occasionally if office was available	Would be used by some but reassurance would be required that the issue was registered	Not seen as appropriate
Applying for a home improvement grant	Would use to source forms and initial information	Needed, due to complexity etc.	Some would use to download forms	Not seen as appropriate
Booking a leisure facility	Generally preferred method (but at the specific facility)	Would use specific facility	Recognition that this could be done, but only limited demand	Not seen as appropriate; even younger people would prefer personal contact with the specific facility
Getting information about care services	Would use as initial point of contact	Needed due to complexity of issue and "getting things done"	Would be used by some for information	Not seen as appropriate

3.6 Based on the foregoing analysis, we believe that the typical range of service encounters can be characterised according to the following dimensions:

- Whether the contact is one-way or two-way.
- The degree of intensity of the two-way interaction which is required.
- The level of complexity and specialisation of the service.

From this, a number of potential service approaches can be identified. These are detailed in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Potential Nature of Service Provision

Type of Service	Example	Preferred Nature of Service Provision
One way contact	Citizens/service sourcing information on community education course	Can be from a range of sources including published information, web or telephone
Two-way contact where limited interaction is required and where scenario is neither complex or specialised	Council Housing tenant reporting a repair Booking a leisure facility	Generally delivered by telephone, but possible through Office
Two-way contact where a greater level of interaction is required, but which is not highly complex or specialised	Council Tax enquiry	Generally handled by telephone but may need written or face-to-face contact on occasion
Two-way contact with a high degree of specialisation	Planning application Applying for home care support	Initial information may be available in a publication or on the web. First contact likely to be by telephone but opportunity for face-to-face contact either at an office or in the field is likely to be required
Automated service	Regular Council Tax payment	No ongoing human intervention required

We believe that most service encounters can usefully be categorised in this way, with the overall model of service delivery then deriving from this.

3.7 Although the Council delivers many different services at the moment, there were a number of common service standards which people thought that all Services should live up to. These included:

- Publishing clear points of contact for all Services
- Keeping in touch with people so that they knew what was happening about their enquiry
- Being flexible and “going the extra mile” to meet the customer’s needs
- Good human aspects of customer service
- Being clear about the charges for any services.

People also thought it crucial that services were actually effectively delivered (e.g. potholes fixed etc.).

- 3.8 A summary of how group participants perceived service delivery in relation to these issues is set out below:

**Table 3.3: Broad Perception of Delivery
Of Service Standards**

Service Standards	Residents' View of Delivery
Clear points of contact	There is, at present, a lack of clarity as to "who does what".
Keeping in touch	Some people do not expect to be kept in touch but simply expect their enquiry to be dealt with. This is fine when this happens but when things take a long time to do it can lead to dissatisfaction.
Being flexible	The degree of flexibility appears to residents to be determined by the individual providing the service rather than the recipient of that service.
Human aspects	These are seen to be inconsistent; sometimes excellent, sometimes poor. This contrasted with examples from other service deliverers, where delivery was perceived to be much more consistent.
Clarity of charges	People were very unsure about charges but did feel that they were communicated accurately when requested.
Delivery	Clearly, there is a very varied picture with regards to this, but a particular concern over roads maintenance was apparent.

The follow-up focus groups felt that the Council's Customer Service Code of Conduct was an effective statement of what should be delivered, although it was not perceived that such a quality of service was always achieved. To some extent, it was perceived to be no more than "common sense".

- 3.9 People in the groups were very concerned about a tendency for organisations delivering services to deliver through automated telephone systems and through outsourced call centres staffed by people who did not know the local area. They would not like the Council to go down this route.
- 3.10 The issue of "keeping in touch" was of particular importance and was discussed further in the follow-up groups. Again, people believed that such contacts needed to be proportionate; the Council should not waste money on keeping in contact just for the sake of it. However, they did feel that there were key standards that the Council needed to subscribe to, and deliver on, in terms of its contact management:

- Provision of a named individual to manage the enquiry

- Stipulation of a timetable for the enquiry
- For more substantive aspects of service delivery, issue of a “satisfaction sheet”, which is done currently for Council Housing repairs.

Participants were less concerned about the method by which people would remain in touch. Whilst text messaging was rarely considered to be appropriate, a combination of telephone, written or e-mail contact would be.

- 3.11 Having identified locality of service as a particular priority, the follow-up groups investigated the potential for people to access a wider range of services from existing Council premises (such as schools, community education facilities, libraries or leisure centres).

In considering responses to this, it should be recognised that, even if people were to support the provision of services in such a way it would not be seen as a substitute for addressing perceived deficiencies which do exist in relation to some of the other service attributes which are described above.

- 3.12 In general, groups such as the one in Oldmeldrum, which were not too far away from existing Council offices, were fairly sceptical about this concept. This was less the case in communities which were either larger or further away from existing Council Offices (for example, in Alford, Huntly and Laurencekirk). These groups were much more positive about the concept, whilst recognising that this had to be set against cost implications (and, ideally, they would like such an approach to be cost-neutral).

- 3.13 The list of scenarios in Table 3.1 above was again used to inform discussions as to the opportunity for such local offices. The different categories of contact and residents’ response to local service provision through such an outlet are described in Table 3.4 below:

Table 3.4: Attitudes to Service Provision through Local Offices

Type of Service	Comments
Information	Seen as appropriate
Making applications	Seen as appropriate
Making payments	Some concerns were raised about the availability of secure, cash-handling facilities
More specialised services	Could be a first point of contact for these (as part of the Information Service)
Bookings	Not generally seen as appropriate for such a local facility

3.14 Whatever mix of services is provided, the follow-up groups confirmed a number of issues relating to the nature of such offices:

- They should be staffed (rather than having interactive booths)
- The quality of staffing, and their training, is a Critical Success Factor
- If at all practical, they should be open for normal office hours.

The most appropriate location would clearly vary for each individual community.

3.15 Some people had already used the Council's web site (www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk) and thought this was a good way of getting information. However, general appreciation of what people could do with the website was limited. For this reason, it is not extensively used at the moment for things like making bookings or payments, but people in the focus groups were increasingly using other web sites to do these things so there may be scope for the Council's web site to offer more such services (but leaving people with the option to do business by other methods).

3.16 A prototype of the new web site design was shown to some of the groups and was almost universally seen in a positive light:

“Smart”

“Easy to navigate”

“Good information”.

Specific aspects, such as the information provided on school closures, were commented on positively in a number of groups.

3.17 The initial point of contact for people was most commonly the Phone Book, although others would make telephone contact by dialling the

number on a letter that they had received or by dialling a number which they had previously used.

The groups discussed two sets of information which could be used to help improve front-end service accessibility. The first of these was a series of options for a new Phone Book advertisement, all of which were perceived positively. Interestingly, the inclusion of a map of Aberdeenshire on one version of this helped some people to get a better appreciation of the Council's coverage. Criticism of these options was generally limited to the view that emerging numbers should take greater precedence in addition to some minor stylistic issues.

3.18 Some concerns were evident about a move to 0845 numbers, which included:

- A perceived loss of locality, which could contribute to the sense of remoteness described earlier.
- Potential confusion of 0845 numbers with premium rates numbers.
- The additional costs which people would incur if their "normal" local costs were already covered in their phone package.

Due to the relatively occasional nature of contact, the latter point was generally no more than a mild annoyance.

3.19 The second item reviewed was the postcard which the Council is about to issue through Council Offices, libraries and so on. Again, this was welcomed and respondents would like to see it distributed widely, using existing distribution channels where possible (e.g. distribution along with Council Tax demands).

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

3.20 The following summary observations may be made with regard to the objectives established for the Customer Service aspect of the assignment:

Objective	Comments
Determine the main reasons for contact with Aberdeenshire Council	Many people perceive themselves to have “no contact” with the Council due to the limited conception they have of the full range of Council Services. Most common reasons for direct contact involve: planning, waste disposal, roads and lighting, Council Tax enquiries and Council Housing enquiries.
Establish how services are accessed	Telephone is almost always the initial method of contact, with people usually looking to access information through the Phone Book or calling the “local office number” which they had previously. A small number of people continue to prefer most contact on a face-to-face basis but for most people, this only applies to more complex situations. An increasing number of people see the web as a source of information but many people are concerned that they would be disadvantaged by over-emphasis on it.
Map out “cycles of service”	The key elements of service include: initial access to information, first contact and service delivery.
Determine desired service attributes	The core service attributes sought, in addition to core delivery, are clear points of contact, keeping in touch, flexibility, human aspects of customer service and clarity of charges.
Determine gaps between expectations and service delivery	There is general inconsistency in terms of service delivery across many of these attributes. In particular, the need to clarify “who does what” and improve some aspects of contact management was noted.
Determine response to different models of service delivery	There is growing demand for services which are one-way in nature to be delivered online. There are mixed views as to the establishment of local satellite offices but support in some larger communities which are geographically peripheral. Although no such plans exist, residents are fearful of delivery through automated services and outsourced call centres. There is almost no demand for communication through text messaging.
Identify key issues in communication of service accessibility	The new phone book and postcard communications were well received but the general view is that the Council could do a better job of communicating its range of services and how they can be accessed.

4.0 PUBLIC PERFORMANCE REPORTING

OBJECTIVES

- 4.1 The overall objectives for this aspect of the assignment were as follows:
- Identify those aspects of the Council's work where members of the public are most interested in receiving information about its performance.
 - To establish areas where emphasis must be placed on educating the public as to the role of the Council.
 - To establish the nature and depth of information which different groups of stakeholders would like to see.
 - To determine the geographical level at which people would like to see information reported.
 - To identify the format in which people would like to see information published.
 - To identify relevant communications channels, including the role of existing Council premises, publication and the web.
 - To identify the appropriate timing of PPR communications.
 - To assess what mechanisms can be put in place to allow different stakeholder groups to provide feedback to the Council.

FINDINGS

- 4.2 The main purpose of the Council issuing information on its performance to the public ("Public Performance Reporting") is to ensure that the Council is held accountable for its decisions and how it spends its resources and to encourage feedback from members of the public. Different groups of people have different levels of interest in this. For many members of the public, information on how the Council is performing is of limited interest overall, other than where Council services have an immediate impact on them. However, some groups of people who are already active in their local communities (for example, being involved in Community Councils or voluntary groups) have a much more detailed and intensive interest in the Council's performance and wish to make the Council more accountable.

It is, however, important to note that people feel that the costs of PPR need to be proportionate to the benefits:

“You don’t want a whole Department setting targets”.

4.3 Most members of the public want clear basic facts about what the Council does and how well it is performing:

- What is the budget?
- What is it spent on?
- Where is it spent?
- How are such decisions made and priorities set?

The public also wants information on what is planned to happen as well as what has already happened.

4.4 When people mentioned specific services, they tended to be the highly visible “universal services” such as roads maintenance and refuse collection. Many participants in the focus groups were not aware of the sheer breadth of services delivered by the Council.

The follow-up groups sought to capture further information on the specific services about which people might like further information and a sample of services was produced to guide this discussion. The preferences for provision of information on these Services is illustrated in Table 4.1 below.

**Table 4.1: Interest in PPR Information
on Selected Services**

Position	Services	Commentary on Resources
Top 5 (of 15)	Planning Roads maintenance Care for the Elderly Waste Management Transportation	These are a combination of services about which at least some concern is expressed and where there is generally a perception of Council responsibilities, although it should be noted that the limits of such responsibilities are not always understood clearly.
Middle 5 (of 15)	Finance The Environment of Towns and Villages Housing Schools Landscape Services	Again, these are issues where there is an understanding that the Council has some responsibility. In some cases (housing and schools) the impact is on a specific group of residents.
Bottom 5 (of 15)	Traffic calming Lifelong learning Leisure and recreation Economic development Libraries	People might feel that these services have less direct impact on them personally.

PPR needs to both reflect people's information requirements and provide an education role as to what the Council does and the impact which it can have on the communities of Aberdeenshire. This educational element needs to focus on relatively basic facts articulated in a manner which people understand – a "Did You Know?" approach.

- 4.5 Often, what people need, so that they can hold the Council accountable, is not facts and figures, but explanations of why certain decisions are made. Many people have a limited knowledge of how decisions are made and some would like it to be made easier for them to get information on this.
- 4.6 As noted, some groups of people are already well informed about the workings of the Council generally and they want to have access to much more detailed information, including facts and figures about what the Council has achieved.

- 4.7 The group discussions suggested that some form of Public Performance Report should be issued to all households in Aberdeenshire. However, this should not be extensive and detailed but should give headline information allowing people to access more detailed information as they need it (this more detailed information could be available in libraries, public buildings and on the Council's web site).
- 4.8 The follow-up groups investigated this issue in greater depth by setting out a range of options for the Council to meet its basic responsibilities in relation to Public Performance Reporting. These discussions are tabulated below:

Table 4.2: Preferred Overall Approach to PPR

Option	Comments
An Annual Report issued to all households	Seen as expensive and wasteful
An Annual Report issued only to people who had expressed an interest	Sometimes not seen as sufficiently inclusive
An Annual Report issued only to people who had expressed an interest but with a summary leaflet issued to every household	One of the preferred options, along with that described below. Seen as balancing some degree of cost-efficiency with inclusiveness and giving everyone the opportunity to access the information they would want
An Annual report issued only to people who had expressed an interest but with a summary leaflet issued with Council Tax demands	A similar level of support to the above, seen as more cost effective than other options but some questioned whether it would be "lost" if issued with Council Tax demands
An Annual PPR "calendar" issued to all households	Some people were extremely enthusiastic about this although there was also considerable concern that it could be seen as too gimmicky
A Council Newspaper issued to all households	People had negative perceptions of general Council newspapers and did not feel that they provided useful information
A "Local Council Newspaper" (at the level of the six administrative areas) addressed to all households	There was a lot of support for this, with many people feeling that it was an opportunity to do more to tell people about the Council's plans in particular areas

4.9 The initial groups were shown a wide range of examples of communication material from the Council in order to provide an insight into the approach which the Council could take. A summary of this information is set out in Table 4.3 (and Council Officers have been provided with reference copies of the relevant documents):

Table 4.3: Brief Overview of Selected Documents

Document	Positives	Negatives
Aberdeenshire PPR	Inexpensive, Indexed, Good information, Detailed, Web Links	You wouldn't pick it up, Didn't know it existed, Distant, Too much jargon, Limited relevance
Council Tax Information Leaflet	Relevant information, Colourful, "paid for by advertising"	Too complex, Time consuming, Small print, Historic, Not accessible, Not retained
East Lothian Council PPR	Nice style, Accessible, Human, Colorful, Admits mistakes / challenges, Good VFM when costs stipulated	No significant negatives
South Ayrshire Calendar	Innovative idea, More people would keep, Links, Useful contact information	Not a great calendar, Could be expensive, Couldn't get all information in
Council Newspaper (South Lanarkshire)	Production quality fine, Openness, Human interest	Relevance of information, Needs to be more local
Newmachar News	Excellent style, Local, Supports local community	Requires a lot of effort on the part of the community to make it work
"Tell Us What You Think"	Inexpensive insert	Too complex, Time consuming, Too focused on complaints, Concern about whether anything will happen
"New" website	Clear, Easy to use, Up-to-date, Fresh Look (especially to young), Some useful information	Concern about "e-deficit" (IBP's words)

- 4.10 This overview highlights a number of principles which the Council should consider adopting:
- Providing a “Gateway” document but also linking this into more detailed information, including use of the web
 - Clear design, using bright colours and graphs
 - Use of plain language (and taking account of other accessibility issues such as print size and language)
 - Keeping costs down
 - Accepting advertising but only if this keeps costs down (when the cost of sourcing that advertising is taken into account)
 - Ensuring a “warts and all” report
 - Making information as “local” as practical.
- 4.11 In particular, people were concerned about the costs of Public Performance Reporting and felt that such communications should not be “over the top”. The core PPR document should not be very expensive but should be designed so that lots of people will hold onto it. Many people would like the Council to kill two birds with one stone by issuing a performance report alongside other communications such as the Council Tax mailing or by including it as part of a Directory of Council Services.
- 4.12 Quite a lot of people thought the web had a role to play in letting the Council report on its performance. It could provide more detailed information about Council activities and performance and could allow people to provide feedback. Already, some of these functions are available on the Council’s web site but it may be that more needs to be done to tell people about this. Also, the web site should be additional to other ways of getting the information; the people who took part in the groups thought it was important that they had a choice.
- 4.13 Both sets of groups explored the potential for specific service reporting and agreed that this should be made available, although with a strong consensus that such information should only be provided on request as well as being made available in Council libraries and other offices. In our discussions, we heard a number of comments from people who had sought to access publications from libraries but had not been able to do so.
- 4.14 The latter groups explored the idea of webcasting of Council meetings. Whilst some participants recognised the potential of this to improve transparency there was little real enthusiasm for it.

- 4.15 As noted in Table 4.3, the current “Tell Us What You Think” leaflet is not well recognised and is seen as overly complex and time consuming, as well as being overly focused on complaints. It may be appropriate to look at this again as part of the wider issue of how people can contact the Council, either to seek explanations, or provide feedback.

Current methods of contact are not generally well recognised and, indeed, many people are unsure of who to contact and how to contact their Councillor. Addressing this problem could be seen as an essential contribution to encouraging a greater degree of active citizenship.

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

4.16 The following observations may be made with regard to the objectives established for the PPR aspect of the assignment:

Option	Comments
Identify aspects of Council's work of most interest for PPR	Citizens' apparent interests are focused around the most visible, universal services.
Establish areas for educational emphasis	There is a need to go "back to basics" in communicating, in very simple terms, the range of services for which the Council is responsible.
Establish nature and depth of information (for different stakeholders)	There is a need for information at different levels including a "Gateway" document along with a more detailed annual report and service reports for the smaller number of people who will access them. Information requirements are general but should focus on future plans in addition to historic performance and do so in a "warts 'n' all" way.
Determine the preferred geographical level of reporting	There is a particular demand for reporting to go, as far as practical, down to the level of individual settlements.
Identify preferred format(s)	Keeping costs down is important but, within this, there is still scope to make information provision much easier to read. The PPR approach will need to use a variety of formats including leaflets, an annual report, "local council newspapers" and the web.
Identify relevant communications channels	Both "push" and "pull" channels will be needed. The former to "push" information into the public domain, the latter to "pull" information from the Council (i.e. when individuals have a specific information request or require explanation of a Council decision or plan). Written publications and the web, as well as Council Offices, all have a role to play.
Identify appropriate timing of PPR communications	There is a general view that historic performance reporting should be on an annual basis. Whilst information needs to be timeous, cost considerations also need to be taken into account.
Assess potential feedback mechanisms	The current mechanisms to provide direct feedback require simplification and there is a need to better publicise the range of mechanisms which do exist for citizens to provide feedback to the Council and individual councillors.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 At this stage, the following recommendations should be seen as a set of “questions” for discussion by the Management Team. Those that warrant further consideration should be referred back to PEST to be developed into an action plan.

Although the recommendations below are given under each of the three project headings it should be recognised that they are inter-related and, it is hoped, mutually reinforcing.

IMAGE AND REPUTATION

- 5.2 At present, there do not appear to be a set of consistent and clear communications messages which apply across the Council and which would be potentially meaningful to residents. It is of course important that the messages are credible and provide a guide for activity rather than simply being “self-promotion”.

It is recommended that the Council adopts a set of clear and consistent core messages that are threaded through all aspects of the Council’s communications, which include publications and the web, but also through the messages sent out by people delivering services.

- 5.3 The Council should consider how it can enhance the visibility of its key decision makers within local communities in Aberdeenshire. This applies both to Council Officers and Members.
- 5.4 In particular, consideration should be given to bringing in a cross-party Communication Code of Conduct for elected members which would set out minimum standards to which they would be expected to adhere with regard to issues such as communication with constituents and availability for surgeries, as well as response times to written and e-mail enquiries.
- 5.5 There are a number of ways that people can contact the Council. The research has identified that these are not as well known as the Council believes. The Council should more proactively promote the ways people can contact its Officers and Members. In particular, this could include;

- A “contact us” line on stationery and other publications
- Posters in local offices.

In all cases appropriate response standards should be in place and be monitored.

- 5.6 Detailed communication strategies should be put in place to explain all the Council’s key policies and strategies, e.g.

- The Council's Planning policies
- Closure and rationalisation of facilities
- Winter gritting.

These should focus on the options which the Council has available to it and the rationale which it has adopted for its chosen options.

- 5.7 There is a perception that year-end expenditure is based on a “use it or lose it” philosophy. The Council's communications strategy should address these negative perceptions.
- 5.8 Specifically, the Council should continue to engage effectively with staff that are most visible in terms of service delivery to develop a set of behavioural standards and principles, and encourage their adoption, so as to promote the key values/messages which we have described above.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND OPERATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

- 5.9 Over time, the Council should undertake an audit of its key services against the key segmentation criteria of:
- Automated services
 - One-way services
 - Two-way contact with limited, non-specialised interaction
 - Two-way services where a greater degree of interaction is required but which are not complex or specialised
 - Two-way contact with a high degree of complexity or specialisation.

The current method of delivering these services should then be mapped against the preferred nature of service provision described herein. It is recognised that this will be a long-term process.

- 5.10 The Council should undertake an internal exercise to review and simplify its existing Customer Service Code of Conduct, placing emphasis on the key service attributes described herein. An additional component of this should be agreement of a set of standards for “keeping in touch” which would address issues such as: provision of named contacts, communication of timescales for service delivery, circumstances where “update” communications are required and services where specific feedback opportunities should be given. These standards need to be agreed in principle across all Services whilst the specifics can vary from service to service.

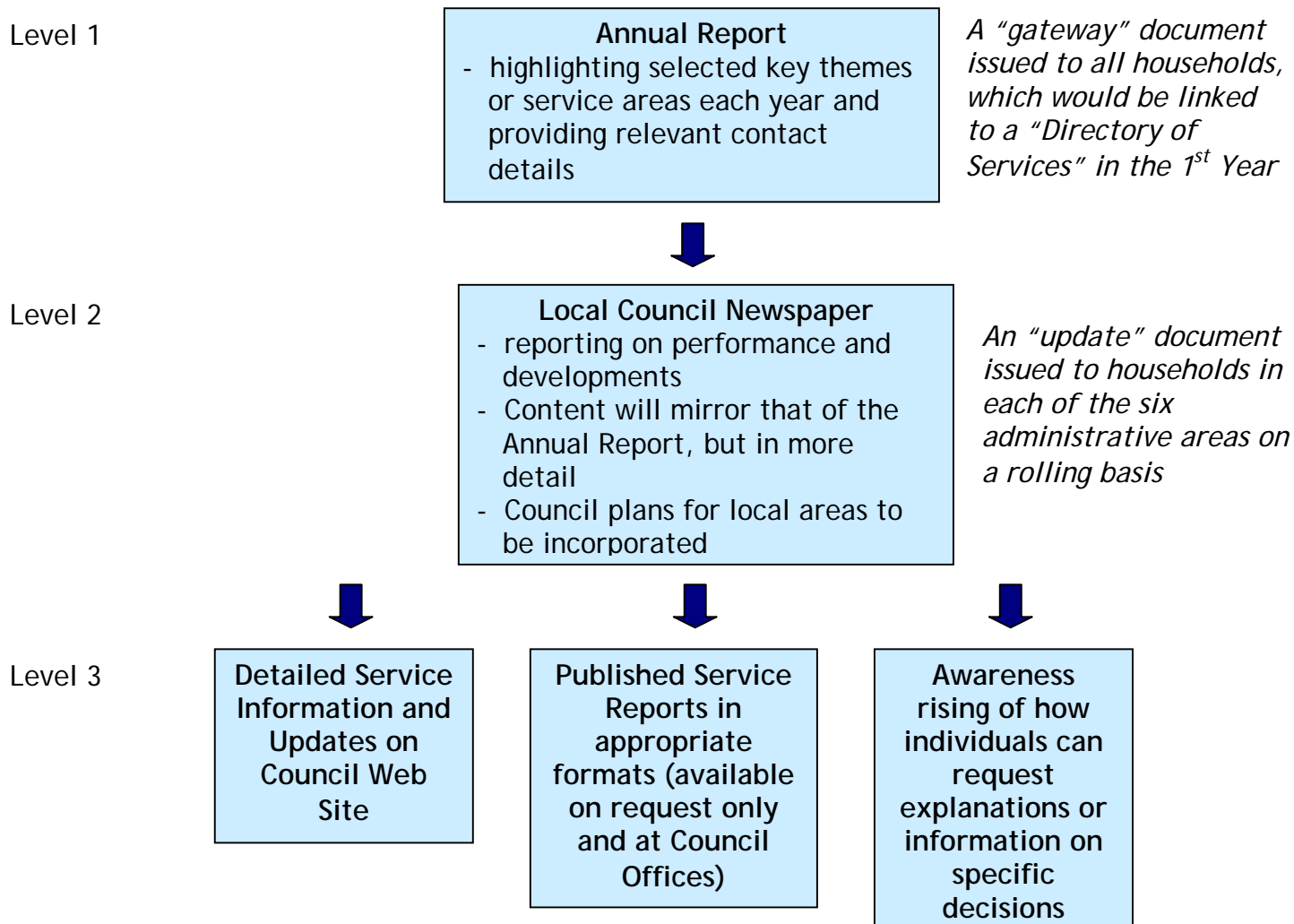
Whilst this process may be complete, for internal purposes, within a year or so, the standards should be “bedded in” prior to their external communication.

- 5.11 The need for appropriate training to deliver on these service attributes should be integrated, as a matter of course, into the Council’s existing processes for identifying and acting upon training needs.
- 5.12 We believe that it would be appropriate for the Council to develop and publish a Directory of Council Services, which would set out details of Services, what they do and how they can be contacted (by telephone, face-to-face or online means). In terms of its initial publication (realistically, 2006) it may be appropriate for this document to form half of an overall document, with the other half comprising the “Gateway” Public Performance Report as described below.
- 5.13 The Council should identify a specific area to pilot a satellite “local office” and should bring forward plans to re-orient service provision in this way. The plans for such services should be for a regularly staffed operation, in a locally-accessible venue, with defined service provision in terms of information provision, applications and financial transactions.
- 5.14 The Council should develop a promotional programme to communicate the potential for people to access services through the web. As well as using the communications methods described herein, a range of other online and offline methods should be used for this.
- 5.15 The opportunities for citizens to provide general feedback to the Council should be simplified and streamlined, including two specific actions:
 - Shorten and simplify “Tell Us What You Think” and agree standards for its availability and distribution.
 - Give consideration to making an on-line option of this available.

In documents such as the proposed Directory of Council Services, and PPR-related documents, the methods to provide feedback should be promoted as a matter of course.

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE REPORTING

5.16 It is proposed that the Council adopt a three-level approach to its Public Performance Reporting, which is described below:



The opportunities set out in Level 3 should be promoted in both the Annual Report/Directory of Services and the Local Council Newspaper, as well as other Council communication channels.

5.17 As noted above, we recommend that the PPR information should be communicated alongside Service information in the form of a joint Directory of Services/Public Performance Report, at least in the first year (i.e. publication in 2006). At this stage, we envisage that the most cost-effective way of achieving this will be through dissemination alongside Council Tax demands.

- 5.18 We recommend that there be a rolling programme of “Local Council Newspapers” which would be published at the level of the six administrative areas and which would include information on Council performance and plans within that area. The frequency of publication is partly influenced by cost constraints, but we would suggest that each area should have such a publication at least once annually.
- 5.19 The Council should agree a list of reports which it will proactively make available. These should generally reflect reports which are already produced in some format (e.g. for external stakeholders such as the Scottish Executive). These reports should be made available on www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk, as well as being made available in all Council libraries and selected Council Offices. Individual facilities should be communicated with to ensure that the agreed list of documents is made available. This is expected to be a progressive process taking up to 18 months for its full implementation.
- 5.20 The Council should adopt an agreed list of standards for all elements of its Public Performance Reporting and set a date in the future for their achievement, so that they can be implemented progressively. The standards should reflect those described herein:
- Providing a “Gateway” document but also linking this into more detailed information, including use of the web
 - Clear design, using bright colours and graphics
 - Use of plain language (and taking account of other accessibility issues such as print size and language requirements)
 - Keeping costs down
 - Accepting advertising but only if this keeps costs down (when the cost of sourcing that advertising is taken into account)
 - Ensuring a “warts and all” report
 - Making information as “local” as practical, whilst ensuring that the corporate identity of Aberdeenshire Council is retained.

NEXT STEPS

- 5.21 The issues described herein are challenging and are long-term in nature. There are no quick fixes and any changes will take time to feed through to public perceptions. This said, actions can commence immediately and we have noted some of the key milestones in the preceding text. As an immediate Next Step, it is proposed the PEST, along with relevant Council Officers, develop a timetabled Action Plan for implementation of these recommendations.

5.22 As noted previously, good practice would suggest that the research findings, along with the core of the Action Plan, be fed back to research participants and it is proposed to do so in two ways.

Firstly, by issue of a Summary Report and secondly through an “Open Night” for participants. Plans for this “Open Night” should be put in place as soon as the outline of the Action Plan has been agreed.