

## Public Attitudes to Local Government in Scotland: A Literature Review

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This paper examines the literature on public attitudes towards local government in Scotland, particularly focusing on satisfaction with council services. It also draws on studies of local government in England, particularly where there is no equivalent information on the Scottish context. The paper explores views of local government and satisfaction with services. It then examines how service use, and demographic and attitudinal variables, can influence satisfaction. Finally, it outlines key factors that drive satisfaction with local government and explores what local authorities can do to improve their public image.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Throughout the UK, it is a common trend for local government services to be far more highly regarded than local government as an institution.
- High-visibility universal services - such as street cleaning - are particularly important in determining public satisfaction with the local area and the local council.
- These high-visibility services tend to attract high dissatisfaction ratings.
- A range of demographic and attitudinal factors that are beyond the local authority's control affect public evaluations of its services. For example, satisfaction with the council tends to increase with age, while satisfaction with council services generally increases as deprivation decreases.
- In addition, users of public services often tend to rate those services more highly than non-users. However, for those services that tend to receive lower satisfaction levels - e.g. road maintenance - service use can exacerbate dissatisfaction.
- A range of demographic and attitudinal factors that are beyond the local authority's control affect public evaluations of its services. For example, satisfaction with the council tends to increase with age, while satisfaction with council services generally increases as deprivation decreases.
- A range of demographic and attitudinal factors that are beyond the local authority's control affect public evaluations of its services.
- Users of public services tend to rate those services more highly than non-users.
- Factors which drive public satisfaction with local government services and which local councils can seek to influence include:
  - perceived quality of services;
  - perceived value for money;
  - local area;
  - media coverage;
  - direct communication;
  - street cleaning/liveability;
  - customer service.
- Residents' perceptions of quality of services and value for money can be enhanced by improved direct communication from the council, as well as by more positive media coverage
- Surveys often show strong support for public consultation but it is vital to explain how the views of residents have been taken into account.
- Both the handling and outcomes of customer contacts are key determinants of satisfaction with the local council.

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### 1. RESEARCH APPROACH AND SOURCES

This report investigates public attitudes towards local government in Scotland, focusing in particular on public satisfaction with local authority services. It provides an overview of resident satisfaction with local council service areas, and explores how service use, and demographic and attitudinal variables, can influence public evaluations of local government services. Finally, it outlines key factors that drive public satisfaction with local government, which it is particularly important for local authorities to harness if they are to improve their public image.

This paper draws on a variety of literature and data sources about attitudes in Scotland; in some cases, it draws upon data from studies of local government in England, particularly where there is no equivalent data in the Scottish context. The key research studies and projects exploring these issues are presented in the table on the next page.

**TABLE 1: Key research studies exploring attitudes towards local government**

Title	Date	Commissioned	Author	Method and Remit
Baseline Study of Public Knowledge and Perceptions of Local Government in Scotland.	1995	Scottish Office	MVA Consultancy	Interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,501. To provide baseline information on public knowledge and perceptions of local government in Scotland, prior to its 1996 reorganisation.
Perceptions of Local Government: A Report of Focus Group Research	1999	Scottish Executive Central Research Unit	Carole Millar Research	Prepared for The Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament. Consisted of six focus groups that met three times over a period of five months, with 8-10 people in each group.
Scottish Household Survey	Annually since 1999	Scottish Executive	TNS; Ipsos MORI Scotland; Scottish Centre for Social Research	Investigates the characteristics, behaviours and attitudes of individuals and households within Scotland; amongst other topics, it explores residents' satisfaction with their own local authority. Interviews are carried out in c. 3,900 households each quarter.
Scottish Social Attitudes Survey	Annually since 1999	Scottish Executive	Scottish Centre for Social Research	Tracks public opinion over time on a range of political, economic, moral and social issues; in some years provides data relating to public perceptions of local government. Consists of 1,600 interviews taking place each year.
Poll Position	2006	Electoral Commission	John Curtice	Investigates knowledge of electoral systems and the factors that motivate voting. Consists of face-to-face interviews with a nationally-representative sample of 134 individuals, as well as eight focus groups, carried out across each of the Scottish Parliamentary regions.
Reputations campaign	2006	Local Government Association	Ipsos MORI	Campaign based on research by MORI, which identifies 12 'core actions' that councils in England can implement in efforts to enhance their local reputations.
Connecting with Communities	2006	Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)		A resource that shows local councils in England how they can improve their communications with residents and other stakeholders. Based on research commissioned by the Department of Communities and Local Government.

## 2. VIEWS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*[...] there is a deep distrust of local government. It is widely perceived as inefficient, wasteful and unresponsive to citizens' wishes.<sup>1</sup>*

The quotation above points to the poor regard in which UK local government is often held. This view is supported by research conducted throughout the UK in 2005: "for many members of the public, local government – and their own council – remains a rather remote, low profile, bureaucratic and inefficient beast".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The POWER Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, p. 158

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006a) *The Business Case for the Reputations Project*. Research Study Conducted for Local Government Association, p. 9

Research carried out as part of the Lyons Inquiry has similarly demonstrated that local authorities in England are perceived to be “bureaucratic, inefficient and wasteful of public money”.<sup>3</sup>

Public attitudes to local government are, however, rather more complex than this negative assessment initially suggests. For instance, in a 1997 survey conducted on behalf of the Local Government Association, 52% of respondents reported being satisfied with the way their own council was doing its job, compared to just 23% who were satisfied with the UK Parliament.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while local government as an institution tends to be poorly regarded, residents’ evaluations of their own councils tend to be far more positive: “respondents tend to be more positive about their own experiences (e.g. their own local council) than they are about institutions as a whole (e.g. ‘local government’)”.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, research consistently demonstrates that individual local authority services are perceived more positively than local councils and local government in general. For instance, a report on public satisfaction with local government in England points out that:

*Ratings of individual councils remain low relative to the services they provide, highlighting key issues around image and reputation of local authorities. We see overall satisfaction among the public with some core service at around the 70-80% level among service users, but the institution much less well regarded.*<sup>6</sup>

This view is supported by other research carried out in England, in which local authorities were frequently accused of financial mismanagement, but the quality of local services – e.g. schools, libraries, fire service, leisure facilities, refuse collection, parks, street lighting – was consistently praised.<sup>7</sup> There is therefore a clear challenge for local government in managing this disparity between satisfaction with specific council services and local government in general.

Many studies reveal strong support for local councils in Scotland. According to an Electoral Commission study, there is “a strong sense of community ‘ownership’” of Scottish local government, with the public perceiving local councils to be approachable and accessible, and therefore accountable to local people.<sup>8</sup> Respondents in that study felt they were more likely to see results if they went to local councils rather than other bodies, such as the Scottish Parliament or the UK Government.<sup>9</sup> A similar pattern is evident in Glasgow, where 32% of residents

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer, A and Thompson, M (2005) *Public Attitudes to Taxation and Public Services*. GfK NOP Research. Prepared for the Lyons Inquiry, p. 5

<sup>4</sup> Local Government Association (1997) *Speaking for Communities: A MORI study of public attitudes to local government*. MORI/LGA, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> Williams, B and Coleman, L (2006) *User Satisfaction and Local Government Service Provision*. Department for Communities and Local Government, BMG Research, p. 18

<sup>6</sup> Page et al., (2004) *What drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government* (analysis conducted for the local government association), p. 12

<sup>7</sup> [www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Agenda/policyreviewgroups/strategyandfinance/090904/item2.pdf](http://www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Agenda/policyreviewgroups/strategyandfinance/090904/item2.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Palmer, A. and Thompson, M. (2005) *op.cit.*, p. 36

<sup>9</sup> Curtice, J. (2006) *Scotland - Poll Position* (The Electoral Commission), p.37

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

reported that contacting their local councillors was an effective means of influencing how services were delivered within their community: this contrasts with just 18% who thought that contacting their MSP would be effective.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

*“There is a clear relationship between how satisfied residents are with how their local council runs things and levels of satisfaction with specific services”.*<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.1 Satisfaction with the council

Within Scotland, there is arguably a “general satisfaction with service delivery and accessibility of the councils”.<sup>12</sup> This view is supported, to a limited extent, by the 2005 *Scottish Household Survey*, in which:

- 42% of respondents agreed that their council ‘provides high quality services’ (while 33% disagreed);
- 37% agreed that their council is ‘doing the best it can with the money available’ (while 36% disagreed);
- 38% agreed that their local council was ‘addressing the key issues affecting quality of life in their neighbourhood’ (while 32% disagreed).<sup>13</sup>

These levels of satisfaction are broadly similar to findings from research investigating public attitudes towards local government in England, where around 42% of respondents report being satisfied with the way their council runs services.<sup>14</sup>

Residents’ surveys from individual local authorities within Scotland do, however, reveal notably higher satisfaction ratings: 60% of residents in West Dunbartonshire, for example, reported being either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the services provided by their council.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, 57% of Glasgow residents were satisfied with the way in which their council was running the local area, in contrast to 23% who were dissatisfied; subtracting the council’s dissatisfaction rating (23%) from its satisfaction rating (57%), Ipsos MORI concludes that Glasgow City Council has a *net satisfaction rating* of +34%.<sup>16</sup>

Satisfaction ratings from these individual local authority surveys are markedly higher than the national figures outlined above. This trend may partly derive from the fact that residents’ surveys are typically conducted through standing panels who have agreed to take part in regular surveys, by telephone, questionnaire, or face-to-face. While they are designed to be a broadly representative sample of

<sup>10</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b) *Glasgow Panel Survey 6*. Research Study Conducted for Glasgow City Council. Ipsos MORI. March – April 2006, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> Williams and Coleman, *op.cit.*, p. 64

<sup>12</sup> Curtice, *op.cit.*, p. 37

<sup>13</sup> TNS Systems 3 and Ipsos MORI (2006) *Scotland's People 2005: Results from the 2005 Scottish Household Survey*, (Scottish Executive)

<[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/08/03090800/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/08/03090800/0)> Table 7.40, Table 7.45, Table 7.50

<sup>14</sup> Williams and Coleman, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Patton, J (2006) *Putting Customers First*. Report by Hexagon Research & Consulting for West Dunbartonshire Community Planning Partnership, p. 17

<sup>16</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b), *op.cit.*, p. 22

the local population (in terms of demographic and other characteristics), the very fact that they have agreed to participate in these studies indicates a degree of interest towards the council, which is likely to result in higher satisfaction ratings. Moreover, as respondents participate in the process, they learn more about the council, and the more knowledge people have about the local authority and the services it delivers, the more likely they are to be satisfied with it.

### **3.2 Satisfaction with service areas**

*Some services have a stronger impact than others on the way people see their council. The cleanliness of streets and pavements, and their state of repair, are particularly prominent.<sup>17</sup>*

Although different residents' surveys adopt different methodologies and use different wordings in their questions, it is possible to identify broad trends about satisfaction with council services. On the whole, arts and leisure facilities and education services tend to achieve high satisfaction ratings. By contrast, road maintenance and street cleaning tend to be associated with high levels of dissatisfaction.

This trend is evident in, for example, the 2006 *Glasgow Panel Survey*, which showed that the least well-regarded council services were road maintenance and pavement maintenance, with only 31% and 48% of residents respectively expressing satisfaction with these services. By contrast, a range of leisure- and education-based services achieved high satisfaction ratings amongst users: for example, libraries (87%); museums and galleries (86%); nursery schools (86%); primary schools (84%); and, sport and leisure facilities (81%).

A similar pattern is evident in the findings of the 2005 *Stirling Sounding Board*. Those services and facilities which attracted the highest *net* satisfaction ratings included: libraries (+67%); community halls and centres (+47%); fire (+46%); art galleries and performance venues (+45%). Those services with negative net satisfaction ratings included: street cleaning (-6%); activities and support for young people (-10%); winter gritting (-11%); and, road maintenance (-55%).

MORI argues that, of all individual service areas, high visibility services relating to the local environment - street cleaning and road maintenance, for example – are the most significant drivers of residents' satisfaction with the local authority. For Scottish local authorities, there is a somewhat unfortunate pattern here, in that those services that attract high dissatisfaction ratings tend to be high-visibility services provided universally to all council residents (e.g. road maintenance and street cleaning). By contrast, those services that attract high satisfaction ratings, such as education and leisure, are non-universal services used by only a particular sector of the population; they are therefore of less significance in shaping the attitudes to local government of the public at large.

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<sup>17</sup> Local Government Association, *op.cit.*, p. 11

### 3.3 Satisfaction with the local area

Given the importance of high visibility services in determining resident satisfaction ratings, many studies suggest that there is a strong correlation between how residents perceive their local environment and how they perceive their local authority. Indeed, when participants in the 2005 *Stirling Sounding Board* were asked what they thought should change in order to improve quality of life in the area, the survey results show a focus on what MORI terms 'cleaner, greener, safer issues', with roads, policing, street cleaning and anti-social behaviour being frequently cited.

**TABLE 2: Things that should change to improve quality of life in the area<sup>18</sup>**

Item	% of respondents
Improved roads	38%
Better public transport	26%
Improved variety of leisure	23%
More/better policing/CCTV	17%
Upgraded housing/cheaper housing/other housing issues	16%
Better street cleaning/eliminate dog fouling	16%
Tackle anti-social behaviour	14%
More frequent refuse collection	13%
Improved variety of leisure for youths/keep them off the streets	11%
Preserve greenbelt/stop building houses	9%
Healthcare improvements	8%
More pedestrian areas/maintenance of footpaths	8%
Better maintained greenery/parks and open spaces	8%
Better shopping facilities	7%
Better schools/education	7%
Lower Council Tax	4%

The 2005 *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey* specifically asked respondents about their satisfaction with the local area as a place to live. When asked what was most in need of improvement in their local area, most respondents selected the level of crime (18%), the amount of good quality affordable housing (12%), facilities for young children (12%) and the condition of public spaces (10%). Non-universal services, such as GPs and health services (4%) and quality of schools (4%) are cited less frequently, again revealing a common concern with visible services related to 'liveability'.

<sup>18</sup> IBP Strategy and Research (2005) *Stirling Sounding Board: Residents Survey 2005 Final Report*, p. 8

**TABLE 3: Now thinking about your local area, if you had to pick just one, which of the things on this is in most need of improvement around here?**<sup>19</sup>

What is in most need of improvement around here?	2004	2005
The level of crime	11%	18%
Access to GPs and local health services	6%	4%
The amount of good quality affordable housing	15%	12%
The amount of good shopping facilities	6%	6%
Access to good public transport	7%	8%
Quality of schools	3%	4%
Quality of jobs	10%	8%
Facilities for young children	16%	12%
The sense of community spirit	5%	4%
Cleanliness of the local environment	6%	6%
The condition of public spaces (e.g. pavements, parks, roads)	6%	10%
Family and friends close by	1%	1%
Access to places to go out (e.g. pubs, restaurants, galleries)	2%	3%
Other answer	2%	1%
None of these	3%	3%
Don't know	1%	1%

Respondents were then asked who should be responsible for making the improvements listed above. The council was widely held to be responsible for those aspects which were most frequently reported as being in need of improvement, with 23% reporting that the council should be responsible for improving crime levels, 48% reporting that it should be responsible for improving the amount of good quality affordable housing and 83% reporting that it should be responsible for improving facilities for young children. The council is therefore perceived to have a key role in improving those services that are linked to evaluations of quality of life.

**TABLE 4: Perceptions of aspects in need of improvement and who should be responsible for making improvements**

Area in need of improvement	Most common choice	Second most common choice
The level of crime	Police (44%)	Council (23%)
Access to GPs/health services	Health board (46%)	Scottish Parl/Exec (30%)
Amount of good quality affordable housing	Council (48%)	Scottish Parl/Exec (35%)
Facilities for young children	Council (83%)	Scottish Parl/Exec (11%)
Quality of jobs	Scottish Parl/Exec (48%)	Council (26%)
Access to good public transport	Council (65%)	Scottish Parl/Exec (24%)
The sense of community spirit	Local people (71%)	Council (26%)

<sup>19</sup> Given, L and Ormston, R (2006) *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2005. Scottish Executive Core Module Technical Report.*  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/05122049/0> p. 28

## 4. FACTORS AFFECTING SATISFACTION

*The young (in these surveys) are more satisfied than the middle-aged and old, men more than women, owner-occupiers more than council tenants, higher social groups more than lower, those living outside metropolitan England more than those in the conurbations. [...] Those with power, hope, opportunity, and a better quality of life appear more satisfied with their local councils – and doubtless much else besides. Such questions may tell us no more than who is happy, and who is not.<sup>20</sup>*

As the quotation above suggests, using surveys to establish satisfaction with the local council presents a number of difficulties: most notably, the fact that evaluations of public services tend to be influenced by a range of demographic and attitudinal variables that are beyond the council's control. Gender, for example, is a significant factor, with men typically reporting higher satisfaction levels than women: "Men are more likely than women to give positive evaluations of the performance of the economy, public transport and the general standard of living in the past 12 months".<sup>21</sup> A range of other demographic variables are similarly influential, and these are described below.

### 4.1 Age

Surveys reveal that satisfaction with certain council services tends to increase with age. As the table below demonstrates, the proportion of respondents in the 2005 *Scottish Household Survey* who agreed that 'My council provides high quality services' rose from 33% of 16-24 year olds, to 54% amongst the 75 + age group.

**TABLE 5: Level of agreement with the statement 'My council provides high quality services' by age.<sup>22</sup>**

	16 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 59	60 to 74	75 plus	All
Strongly agree	2	4	4	4	6	8	4
Tend to agree	31	34	34	38	43	46	38
Neither agree nor disagree	22	21	22	18	15	14	19
Tend to disagree	18	22	21	22	20	14	20
Strongly disagree	12	13	14	14	13	10	13
No opinion	15	7	5	3	3	8	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Base	1,146	1,961	2,646	3,373	3,132	1,796	14,054

<sup>20</sup> Young, K and Rao, N (1997) 'Public Attitudes to Local Government'. In, *New Perspectives in Local Governance: Reviewing the research evidence*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. York, pp. 118-156: p. 152

<sup>21</sup> Given and Ormston, *op.cit.*, p. 9

<sup>22</sup> TNS Systems 3 and Ipsos MORI, *op.cit.*, p.198

Responses to other questions showed a similar pattern: the proportion who agreed that 'My council does the best it can with the money available' rose from 25% amongst the 16-24 age group, to 50% amongst the 70+ age group. Equally, the proportion of respondents who agreed that 'My council is addressing the key issues affecting quality of life in my neighbourhood' was 28% of 16-24 year olds, compared to 48% amongst the 75+ age group.

Within the 2005 *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey*, a key exception to this trend relates to standards in education, where young people hold more positive views than any other group.<sup>23</sup> Service use, rather than age itself, is likely to be the determining factor here: this is also likely to be the case when younger age groups express greater dissatisfaction with activities and support for young people, as reported in the *2005 Stirling Sounding Board*.

#### **4.2 Ethnicity**

Within the Scottish context, there is a limited amount of data investigating how the attitudes of particular ethnic groupings differ from those of the population at large. The 2006 *Glasgow Panel Survey*, for example, established that while 23% of residents were dissatisfied with the way the council runs things, dissatisfaction was higher amongst white residents. The research also identified disparities in satisfaction with individual services, showing, for example, that BME residents were less likely to be satisfied with refuse collection than white residents (63% compared to 75%).

#### **4.3 Deprivation levels**

The findings of the 2005 *Scottish Household Survey*, demonstrate that satisfaction with council services increases as deprivation decreases. In the least deprived quintile of the *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation*, 45% agreed that: "My council provides high quality services"; this compared to 39% in the most deprived quintile. Similarly, in the least deprived areas, 27% disagreed with this statement, compared to 40% in the most deprived areas.

This association between dissatisfaction and deprivation is also apparent in the responses to the statement, "My council is addressing the key issues affecting quality of life in my neighbourhood." 19% of residents in the most deprived areas disagreed with this statement, compared to just 9% in the least deprived areas.

#### **4.4 Rurality**

A 1995 survey showed that people in rural areas of Scotland were more likely to say that services in their area were not being delivered to the same standard as elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Research conducted for the Scottish Consumer Council in 2004 also highlighted the continuing existence of the perception that councils provide varying levels of service within their respective localities: "In rural areas it was felt that the main centres of population received superior services compared to

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<sup>23</sup> Given and Ormston, *op.cit.*, p. 10

<sup>24</sup> MVA Consultancy (1995) *Baseline Study of Public Knowledge and Perceptions of Local Government in Scotland*. Scottish Office Central Research Unit, Environment Research Programme Research Findings, No.9.

outlying localities.”<sup>25</sup> Perceived differences in rural and urban service provision are particularly stark in relation to transport: the 2005 *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey* suggested that, while people in cities were most positive about standards of transport over the past 12 months, people in small towns, and remote small towns in particular, were the least positive.

#### 4.5 Party Political Identification

Popularity of the national government can influence public attitudes to local government: as MORI argues, “those who are satisfied with the way government is running the country are significantly more likely to express satisfaction with their own local authority”.<sup>26</sup> Attitudes towards public services similarly tend to vary according to whether respondents support the political parties of the current administration or opposition parties, or whether they have no party political identification.

The table below presents findings from the *2005 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey*, conducted when Labour and Liberal Democrats were the political parties of the Scottish Executive. It shows how respondents, displayed according to party political identification, evaluated standards in education over the previous 12 months:

**TABLE 6: Evaluation of standards in education in the last 12 months, by party identification, 2005<sup>27</sup>**

% who say standards have...	...increased	...stayed the same	...fallen	Net balance (increased - fallen)	Sample size
Conservative	22	38	20	2	245
Labour	35	36	14	21	534
Liberal Democrat	24	39	16	8	214
SNP	20	45	18	2	195
None	17	41	16	1	293
All	25	39	16	9	1549

The table demonstrates that more respondents stated that standards had increased than had fallen. Supporters of the opposition parties (SNP and Conservatives) and those with no party political identification were, however, more likely than Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters to report that standards in education had fallen over the previous 12 months.

#### 4.6 Service Use

One key determinant of satisfaction ratings is service use. Satisfaction levels are influenced by a number of factors, including:

<sup>25</sup> Brown, M. (2004) *How do you rate your council? A study of the use and relevance of local government performance information*. Scottish Consumer Council. p. 24

<sup>26</sup> Page et al. *op.cit.*, p. 35

<sup>27</sup> Given and Ormston, *op.cit.*, p. 13

- direct experience of the service
- word of mouth from family and friends
- the media.

Non-users tend to only form their opinions of council services through word of mouth and the media; as a result, they are often more negative than users.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, data from the 2005 *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey* demonstrates that use can play a key role in driving positive evaluations of public services. When asked to evaluate standards of public transport over the previous 12 months, 35% of those who used public transport every day reported that it had improved, compared to 12% who used it either less than once a month or never.<sup>29</sup> This research also suggests that those respondents with experience of the education system tend to evaluate it more favourably.<sup>30</sup>

The table below presents net satisfaction ratings with Stirling Council service areas, comparing those of users and those of the population at large.

**TABLE 7: Comparison of net satisfaction with the quality of services and facilities between all respondents and service users<sup>31</sup>**

Service or Facility	Total base of respondents	% of respondents who had used service in last 12 months	Base of service users	Net satisfaction (all respondents)	Net satisfaction (service users only)
Libraries	867	64%	560	+67%	+82%
Community halls and centres	867	54%	479	+47%	+66%
Fire	867	5%	41	+46%	+73%
Art galleries & performance venues	867	50%	438	+45%	+74%
Primary schools	867	24%	206	+38%	+69%
Sport and leisure facilities	867	54%	450	+30%	+42%
Secondary schools	867	22%	173	+26%	+50%
Activities and support for young people	867	15%	122	-10%	-12%
Road maintenance	867	54%	466	-55%	-68%

<sup>28</sup> Donovan, N, Brown, J and Bellulo, L (2001) *Satisfaction with Public Services: A discussion paper*. Cabinet Office, Performance and Innovation Unit.  
<<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/downloads/files/satisfaction.pdf>>

<sup>29</sup> Given and Ormston, *op.cit.*, p. 10

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>31</sup> Adapted from IBP Strategy and Research, *op.cit.*, p. 12

The table reveals striking incidences where satisfaction ratings are significantly higher amongst users than among the population in general. The most notable of these is the net satisfaction rating for primary schools, which is +38% amongst the population at large, but rises to +86% amongst service users (presumably, those with school-age children).

It is not, however, the case that users always rate services higher than non-users. On the contrary, in those service areas that generally receive lower satisfaction ratings, service use can exacerbate dissatisfaction. For example, while net satisfaction with road maintenance is -55% amongst the population at large, this falls to -68% when only those classed as road users are considered. The residents' survey conducted in Glasgow identifies a similar pattern: "residents with a car in the household are significantly more likely to say that they are dissatisfied with road maintenance than those without (59% are dissatisfied, compared with 41% of those without a car)".<sup>32</sup>

## **5. DRIVERS OF SATISFACTION**

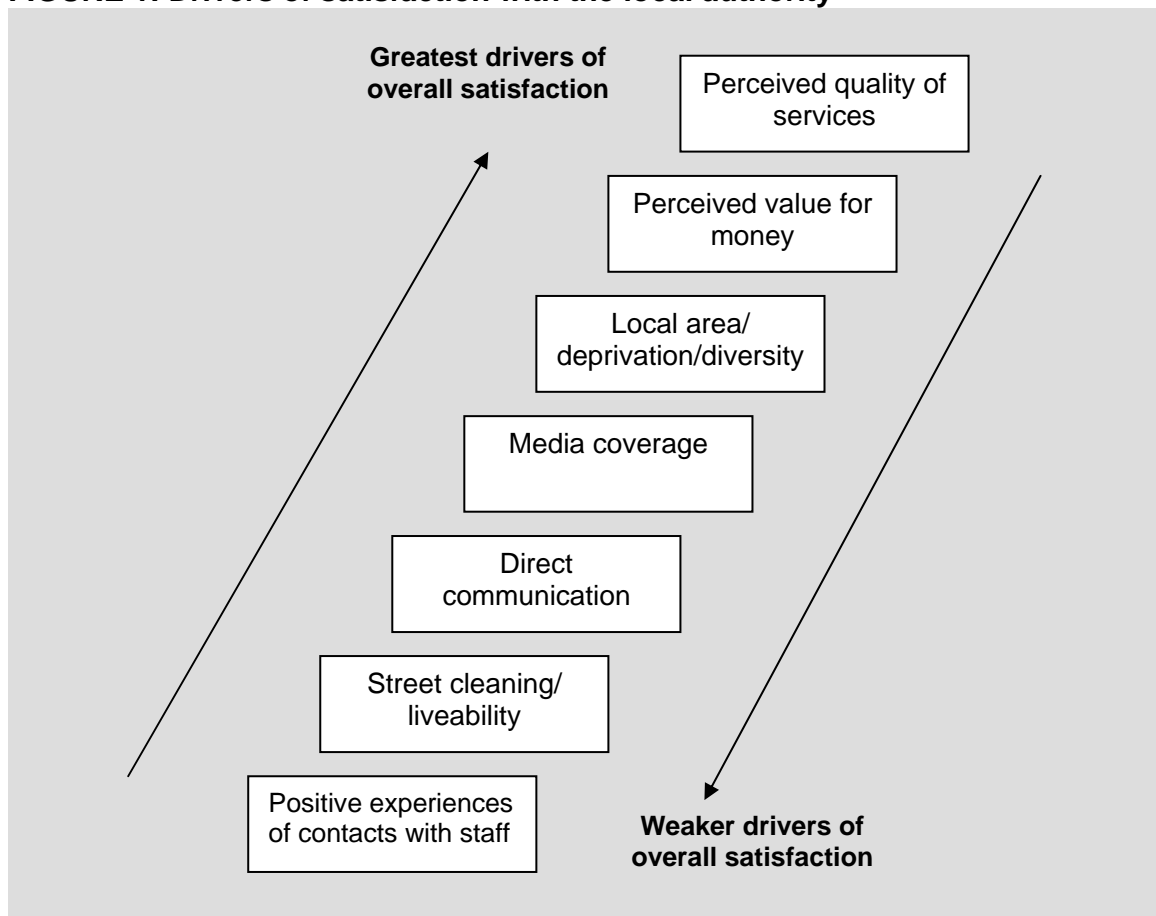
If public satisfaction with local government services is affected by a range of demographic and attitudinal factors that are beyond the local authorities' control, what can the local authority do to improve its public image?

In research conducted for the LGA, MORI investigated which factors and attributes correlate most closely with overall satisfaction with councils in England. It identified a range of factors that determine, or 'drive', public satisfaction with the local authority and which the council can influence in order to improve its public reputation. These 'drivers' of satisfaction are depicted in the model on the next page:

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<sup>32</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b) *op.cit.*, p. 31

**FIGURE 1: Drivers of satisfaction with the local authority**<sup>33</sup>



The strongest driver of overall satisfaction, according to this model, is *perceived* quality of services, a factor that is unlikely to be enhanced simply by improving service delivery. Rather, in order to enhance the perceived quality of services, it is important to also address the other factors in this model.

The next most important factor is perceived value for money; this is influenced less by actual council tax levels, and more by how well-informed residents feel about how their council is spending that council tax. The local area is highlighted as the next most important factor, with MORI research demonstrating that satisfaction ratings with the local council will tend to be lower amongst more deprived and ethnically mixed communities, than among more affluent and homogenous ones.

Press coverage of the local council's activities, and direct communication from the council, have both been shown to influence resident's perceptions of the authority. Indeed, many of the other drivers of satisfaction identified here – notably, the perception that the authority provides good quality services, value for money and good customer care – can all be enhanced by effective communications.

The visible services, discussed above, which affect quality of life in neighbourhoods, are judged to have the next most significant impact in driving resident satisfaction. Finally, positive experiences of customer contact with

<sup>33</sup> Page et al., *op.cit.*

council officials can play a significant role in enhancing residents' perceptions of the authority.

The particular factors that local authorities can seek to influence are discussed in further detail below.

### **5.1 Perceived value for money**

The *perception* of value for money is a key determinant of overall satisfaction with local government services: those who think the council provides good value for money are more likely to be satisfied with the way the council runs things.<sup>34</sup> Research in England established that 20% of those who thought that the council offered good value for money agreed that the council was doing a better job than a year ago: this compared to 5% who thought it did not offer good value for money.<sup>35</sup> The same research also shows that that perceptions of value for money vary between sub groups: for example, 47% of those satisfied with the local area as a place to live think the council offers value for money, compared to 16% who are dissatisfied with the area as a place to live.<sup>36</sup>

The perception of value for money is more important than actual levels of council tax in determining levels of satisfaction: residents are more interested in knowing what they get for their council tax and whether they think it is value for money.<sup>37</sup> Perceptions of value for money are therefore connected to how well an authority communicates to residents exactly what it is providing and how money is being spent.<sup>38</sup>

There is little data within Scotland relating to public perceptions of the value for money offered by council tax. This topic does, however, feature in some Citizens Panels. For example, 22% of West Dunbartonshire residents agreed that their council provides services that are value for money; 25% disagreed, although this figure was slightly higher (27%) in regeneration areas. In a Scotland-wide study conducted for the Scottish Consumer Council, 27% of people reported that their local council offered 'poor', 'very poor' or 'terrible' value for money.<sup>39</sup>

### **5.2 Communication**

The perception of value for money is linked to effective communication: local authority residents are more likely to regard council tax as offering good value for money if their council effectively explains how their money is being spent. Indeed, communication is frequently identified as a key determinant of resident satisfaction with the local council: survey respondents are more likely to give their council high satisfaction ratings if they feel well-informed by council literature and the local press. Research conducted in England found that 68% of respondents who felt well informed about their local authority and the services it provided were

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Williams and Coleman, *op.cit.*, p.24

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> Page et al., *op.cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b) *op.cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Wallace, J with Pulford, A (2006) *Building on Success: Consumer satisfaction with public services*. Scottish Consumer Council.

satisfied, as opposed to only 26% of those who did not feel well informed. Equally, those who feel well informed were more likely to think the council is doing a better job than a year ago (18% compared to 4%).<sup>40</sup>

More specifically, in order to positively affect satisfaction ratings, communications must focus on those issues that have been shown to impact on residents' perceptions: namely, quality of services, value for money, and efficiencies.<sup>41</sup> Consumers generally want information on: how the council is taking into account residents' views on services; how the council is using and spending its resources; and reassurance that the services they receive are of the same quality as those elsewhere within their council area.<sup>42</sup>

### **5.3 Consultation**

Given the importance of communication, it is unsurprising that surveys frequently show strong support for public consultation. In focus group research in 1999, respondents reported that they wanted more consultations from their local authorities, as long as they were cost-effective and "taken seriously".<sup>43</sup> If consultations are to be successful in improving public perceptions, they should close what MORI terms "the communication-consultation loop"<sup>44</sup>: that is, they should explain to residents how their views were taken into account. The *Connecting with Communities* initiative similarly emphasises that:

*Trust in local government can also be built if residents are made aware of how their views and opinions have been taken on board and what has changed as a result.*<sup>45</sup>

If this does not happen, participants often "conclude, maybe rightly, that their views have in fact not been taken into account and that the engagement process was just a bureaucratic or cosmetic political exercise."<sup>46</sup> The incorporation of effective feedback processes into the consultation process is therefore one important route to improving public attitudes towards the local council.

### **5.4 Press Coverage**

Studies frequently identify press coverage as a key - and often negative - influence on public attitudes to local government. Research conducted in England established that the most common method of finding out about the council was the local media, with 37% of survey respondents citing this as their primary source of information. Information provided by the council was the second most common source, at 33%.<sup>47</sup> Research carried out for the Lyons Inquiry also noted

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<sup>40</sup> Williams and Coleman *op.cit.*, p.13

<sup>41</sup> Page et al., *op.cit.*, p.5

<sup>42</sup> Brown, M. *op.cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Carole Millar Research (1999) *Perceptions of Local Government: A Report of Focus Group Research* (Scottish Executive – Central Research Unit)

<sup>44</sup> Page et al., (2004) *op.cit.*, p.5

<sup>45</sup> Shared Intelligence (2006) *Connecting with Communities: The Business Case for Communications*. Communities and Local Government & IDeA, p. 6

<sup>46</sup> The Power Inquiry *op.cit.*, p. 234

<sup>47</sup> Williams and Coleman *op.cit.*, p.69

that people's largely negative perceptions of local government were strongly shaped by the local media: "Local newspapers, in particular, appeared to be the main source of people's knowledge of what their local council was doing and the main forum for holding local authorities to account".<sup>48</sup>

What then are the characteristics of press coverage of local government issues? According to Ipsos MORI, there is a tendency towards writing about individual councils rather than about local government as a whole, and a bias towards negative, rather than positive, stories. Reporting on the results of a media analysis of how local government issues are covered in the press, Ipsos MORI claimed that some 39% of stories were negative compared to only 10% that were positive (with 51% being considered neutral).<sup>49</sup> As a result, the *Connecting with Communities* initiative emphasises the need for councils to build positive working relationships with the media.<sup>50</sup>

The limited data which exists in the Scottish context appears to emphasise the role of the local press in communicating information about the local council: for Stirling residents, for example, the preferred method of receiving information about the council and its services is local newspapers, with 72% of respondents citing this as their favoured method. This was significantly higher than other methods, including the council newsletter 'Stirling Focus' (61%), leaflets and posters (48%) and the council website (36%).<sup>51</sup>

## **5.5 Customer Care**

Research carried out within the English context identifies effective customer care as a key determinant of satisfaction ratings, revealing a strong correlation between residents' dissatisfaction with customer service received and their dissatisfaction with the council as a whole.<sup>52</sup> More specifically, when a resident contacts their local council with a query or complaint, both the *handling* and the *outcomes* of customer contacts are significant in driving customer satisfaction.<sup>53</sup>

According to the LGA's *Reputations* project, however, the handling of the contact is of even greater importance than the outcome: of those who are happy with the outcome of their contact with the council, 59% will be positive about the authority in general, whereas this will fall to about 30% amongst those who are unhappy with the outcome of their contact with the council.<sup>54</sup> The handling of the contact, regardless of the outcome, has an even greater impact: 70% of those who are happy with the handling of the contact will be happy with the council as a whole, whereas only 24% of those who are unhappy with the handling of the contact will be satisfied with the council in general.

What, then, are the implications of this for the public image of Scottish councils? While focus group research tends to focus on negative experiences, with

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<sup>48</sup> Palmer and Thompson *op.cit.*, p. 32

<sup>49</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b) *op.cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Shared Intelligence, *op.cit.*

<sup>51</sup> IBP Research, *op.cit.*

<sup>52</sup> Williams and Coleman (2006), *op.cit.*, p. 74

<sup>53</sup> Page et al., *op.cit.*, p.5

<sup>54</sup> Ipsos MORI (2006b) *op.cit.*

respondents describing instances of poor staff attitude,<sup>55</sup> quantitative surveys of Citizens Panels reveal rather more positive findings. In 2005, 60% of Stirling residents expressed satisfaction with their most recent contact with the council, while 23% expressed some degree of dissatisfaction. The 2006 *Glasgow Panel Survey* has broadly similar findings: 63% of respondents were satisfied with the contact they made with the council in the previous 12 months, while 27% reported being dissatisfied.

Neither survey investigates the extent to which satisfaction with customer service correlates with overall satisfaction with the local council. It should be emphasised that, within Scotland, only 16% of the public reported having contacted a local council official within the previous 12 months, so good customer care is likely to only prove a key driver of satisfaction for this limited number of respondents.<sup>56</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

It has often been noted that, while local council services throughout the UK generally attract high satisfaction ratings, local government as an institution tends to be far less well regarded. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that, in England, the institution of local government is often perceived to be bureaucratic and inefficient, despite general satisfaction with local authority services.

Within Scotland, there is evidence of positive public attitudes to local government, with the public apparently perceiving their local councils to be accessible and accountable. Moreover, residents' surveys from individual local authority areas often reveal high levels of satisfaction with local council services, with non-universal services such as education and leisure generally attracting particularly high satisfaction ratings. Where services attract poor satisfaction ratings, it tends to be those such as road and pavement maintenance. This trend presents a challenge for councils as these high-visibility, universal services are particularly influential in driving public satisfaction with the local council.

Studies relating to English local government have identified those factors that drive public satisfaction with local councils and a range of actions that councils can undertake in order to improve their public reputations. Chief amongst these is communication: residents who feel that they are well-informed about the council are more likely to be satisfied with its services and believe it to offer good value for money. Improving direct communication from the council and building positive working relationships with the media are therefore key actions for local authorities aiming to improve their public image. Similarly, improving customer care and incorporating feedback mechanisms into the consultation process are other key routes to improving public satisfaction.

Satisfaction ratings for local authority services are not a measure of service quality. Rather, they are influenced by a range of demographic and attitudinal factors: those in more affluent areas will tend to express higher satisfaction than those in less affluent areas, older age groups tend to express higher satisfaction than younger age groups and service users often express higher satisfaction than

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<sup>55</sup> Carole Millar Research, *op.cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Hope, S. and King, S. (2005) *Public Attitudes to Participation*. (Scottish Executive Social Research) MORI Scotland, p. 6

non-users. As a result, high dissatisfaction ratings for a local authority's roads may be less a reflection of poor road condition, and more the result of high car ownership within the area. When attempting to improve their public reputations, local councils therefore always face the challenge that public attitudes towards their services are influenced by a complex range of factors that are beyond their control.

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