



# *Perceptions of Local Government in England*

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Key findings from qualitative research



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Sally Taylor and Bridget Williams  
BMG Research Ltd

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Department for Communities and Local Government  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London  
SW1E 5DU  
Telephone: 020 7944 4400  
Website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction and Methods

- 1.1 BMG Research were commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government (then ODPM) to undertake a programme of qualitative research<sup>1</sup> of local authority residents to examine views and perceptions of local government. The research comprised three elements, covering three differing objectives:
- i. The first tranche of research aimed to inform the design of new modules of the Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) User Satisfaction study. The research concentrated on issues of choice, user focus and satisfaction with services.
  - ii. The next project aimed to further explore residents' views on local government with the aim of understanding why there are some "mismatches" between CPA scores<sup>2</sup> and BVPI local government user satisfaction figures.
  - iii. The third project specifically aimed to explore issues raised in two "Daughter Documents" published by ODPM in January 2005: "Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter" and "Vibrant Local Leadership".
- 1.2 In total, the three projects comprised 13 focus group discussions and two full-day workshops with residents in 13 local authorities in England. Details of the sample structure and respondent profiles are appended.
- 1.3 Although the three elements of the research had different objectives, all covered issues of resident satisfaction with their local authority. This report aims to bring together the findings on this subject from the three strands of research.

<sup>1</sup> Qualitative research involves an interactive process between the researcher and those being researched. It provides a way of probing underlying attitudes and obtaining an understanding of the issues of importance. The real value of qualitative research is that it allows insight into attitudes, and the reasons behind those attitudes, that could not be probed in as much depth with a structured questionnaire.

Group discussions allow participants to share and explore their attitudes and experiences. It represents an excellent way of mapping the range and extent of these attitudes and experiences. However, it is noticeable that in this type of environment, respondents tend to be considerably more negative and critical than might be the case in a normal conversation or depth interview. Similarly, some of the comments reported in the body of this report, although they may not be factually accurate, are an account of the beliefs and views held by respondents. Moreover, it must be remembered when interpreting these results that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence. The findings are based on a small sample, which is designed to cover a cross-section of residents, but this should not be confused with statistical Representativeness (Taylor, S. (2005) A Note on Qualitative Research Birmingham: BMG Research).

<sup>2</sup> The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is undertaken by The Audit Commission. It assesses local councils and the services they provide to local people. The assessments comprise evidence from surveys, from other external review bodies and the Commission's judgements.

# CHAPTER 2

## Key Findings

### SATISFACTION WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

- 2.1 In all three elements of the research, as in various other studies that have analysed residents' satisfaction with their local authority, it appears that service provision is the key driver of residents' satisfaction. For most people, "local authority service provision" means, above all, refuse collection and recycling, followed by leisure, sporting and recreational facilities, parks and keeping the streets clean.
- 2.2 Assessing satisfaction with service provision is complicated by the fact that there is considerable confusion and misunderstanding about the demarcation of local authority responsibility and those of other providers, in terms of service provision (high level authorities, Police, the lack of NHS Dentists in the area, etc.). Awareness of the range of services provided by councils tended to be low across all three strands of the work, and when shown a list of the council's services, most respondents expressed surprise at the range of services provided.
- 2.3 In all strands of the research, residents' first reactions when asked to discuss their local authority are largely negative and critical. It is rare for respondents to state that they are very satisfied with their local authority. In general, those aspects of service provision that are working well appear to receive far less attention to those than are perceived to be sub-standard. Some respondents noted that a service which is working well tends to fall into the background, with respondents expecting that this is a "normal" standard of service.
- 2.4 Respondents in their 30s to 50s appear to be the most negative, with younger and older respondents most positive about council provision.
- 2.5 When assessing their level of satisfaction, it appears that first of all, most respondents focus in on quite passive experiences of services – what they see and pass by in their day-to-day life: issues like litter, graffiti, crime, parks, traffic and so on.
- 2.6 When it comes to more "active", actual physical contact and involvement with council services, most respondents think first about refuse collection and to a lesser extent, doorstep recycling facilities – even though this is usually still quite a passive level of "involvement".
- 2.7 In almost every group, respondents noted that their council tax is high, and many felt that it is too high. A key theme throughout the discussions is respondents' desire to know that their money is being spent wisely on what they see as core services.

- 2.8 In order for their satisfaction with the local authority to increase, most respondents want to see improvements to a fairly consistent range of services (particularly anti-social behaviour, activities for young people and traffic).

### **CONTACT WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY**

- 2.9 For a minority of respondents, direct contact with local authority staff can have a significant impact on residents' overall views of their council – serving usually to reinforce, but occasionally to question their pre-existing views about the council as a whole.
- 2.10 Negative encounters with staff are clearly likely to have a correspondingly negative effect on resident's views of the council. In some cases, it seems that these negative encounters are more likely to affect respondents' overall satisfaction, where they live in a pleasant environment and are accustomed to receiving good service from their local authority.
- 2.11 Respondents seem to have far more examples of occasions on which they have had an unsatisfactory (rather than positive) experience with local authority staff. Reports centre on the failure of staff to ring back and answer queries and the length of time it takes for the council to rectify what respondents view as apparently simple problems (such as faulty fencing or street lighting)
- 2.12 There were fewer reports of instances where residents have experienced excellent service from council staff. The groups in which residents had the most positive things to say about staff tended to be more likely to be satisfied with the council. In areas where residents were overall dissatisfied with their council, a positive assessment of these staff does not appear to impact greatly on overall satisfaction.
- 2.13 In the third strand of research, we explored whether respondents had previously attempted to tackle local issues in their area by taking some action. In most cases, respondents found that their action had not translated into any real change, and they had been left disillusioned and more negative about the council in general.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF COUNCILLORS**

- 2.14 Few of the respondents we interviewed across the three strands of qualitative research have more than a rough idea about what a councillor does. Some respondents, in particular younger respondents, have no real understanding at all and often confused councillors and local authority staff.
- 2.15 In one strand of the work, respondents were shown a list of the local councillors in their area and many were extremely surprised by the number of councillors in their council, questioning the cost implications for the tax payer.
- 2.16 In the main, respondents do not know the identity of their local councillor. Most take very little interest in local politics and are highly cynical about what would motivate a person to stand for election to the council.

- 2.17 Impressions of councillors on the whole were fairly negative, with councillors described as inaccessible and “haughty”. The general view expressed was that councillors are driven by their ego and desire for local recognition rather than a will to serve the people in their local area. Some go further than this, feeling that councillors want to make some personal gains from their position. There is a feeling that once residents become councillors they in some way, lose their affinity with the people they are supposed to represent, becoming part of a council clique or even conspiracy.
- 2.18 It was felt that councillors should be down to earth, approachable, available and good listeners. They should be local people who know the area well, are able to weigh up evidence and make decisions, and above all, who are able to get things done.
- 2.19 A very widely held view is that councillors only come and seek out residents’ views at election time (if at all). It would appear that these views are, to some extent, a reflection on respondents’ general world-weariness with national politics, although they were consistently expressed across all three strands of the work.
- 2.20 Although few respondents have personal experience of councillors, many are aware of stories about local councillors who have either been charged with or suspected of some type of corruption. Some of these examples seem to have taken on a status close to that of local urban myth. Others mentioned that they were aware of councillors “sniping at each other” in the local press.
- 2.21 Very few respondents had had direct experience of a councillor: almost all older people. Where respondents have asked for a councillor’s help or been present at a lobby-style meeting, many were highly impressed with the professionalism and commitment of the individual councillors.
- 2.22 In general, few respondents make any direct connections between their views and experiences of their local councillors, and their views of the council in general. Some respondents noted that the same people in the council do the work, regardless of who the councillor is. In that sense, they were unable to see any connection between their local councillor and service provision in their local area. In particular, they did not think that voting out their local councillor would have any impact on service provision.
- 2.23 The third strand of the research looked in more detail at views of councillors as local leaders. Many believed that councillors should be in a position to provide real leadership to their communities, and called for them to engage with the community and listen to local people’s views and ideas. They felt that to do this, councillors would need to be more visible, proactive and accessible, and to have their views acted on by those with the real power to effect change.

## COMMUNICATION FROM THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

- 2.24 When asked about communication from the council, respondents tend to think of written communication, and principally, the annual publication that accompanies their council tax bill and breaks down how this money is spent. Those respondents who have read the local authority newsletters generally found their tone “irritating” and “self-congratulatory” and the information akin to “propaganda”.
- 2.25 Perceptions were also commonly formed from word of mouth from friends and family, and from the local press. In general, respondents were more positive in areas where the council has a good relationship with the local press.
- 2.26 In many groups, respondents commented that the council is at its most proactive, in communication terms, when it “wants your money”, but far less energetic in other forms of communication.
- 2.27 A recurrent theme through all three strands of the research is a feeling that the council should be making far more of an effort to communicate more effectively, openly and honestly with its residents. Improved communication of this type would, it is considered, help to establish greater trust between residents and council.
- 2.28 The types of information that would be welcomed included information on upcoming plans for consultation; “balance sheets” of plans each year, and progress of work in those areas; and simple financial breakdowns to allow residents to make their own assessment of the value for money provided by the council. The communication should explain in an honest and detailed way why particular policies have been adopted, how much they cost, whether they were over or under budget, etc. They should also “own up” when things have not gone to plan – election promises are not kept, projects run over budget, etc., rather than “sweep it under the carpet”.
- 2.29 There is a desire for more written information, provided that it is “an honest account”, and perhaps in a different format or media, e.g. a section in the local paper or free paper. But alongside this, civil servants and elected officials need to be far more available and accessible to the public, “out and about” more in their communities. For some, face-to-face contact is the key to building up trust, interest and dialogue.
- 2.30 Many respondents highlight what they consider to be “phoney” consultation exercises which, they feel, failed to provide feedback and/or take on board their views. Those who had expressed their views and had not received feedback tended to be amongst the most negative about their council.
- 2.31 Councils need to be seen to be listening to residents’ views, and then, crucially, be seen to act on the views obtained. Where residents feel that consultation has been lip service, their trust in and satisfaction with their council is significantly affected.

## TRUST

- 2.32 A central theme that ran through the research is that many respondents do not trust their local authority – both the council as an entity *and* their local councillors. Respondents generally understood trust to mean “integrity” and “good judgement” on the part of councillors and officers, and also financial trustworthiness: as an organisation that will do its best to deliver the highest quality services within the tightest budget.
- 2.33 The main reasons residents gave for this lack of trust fall into two strands: a deep-seated mistrust of politics and politicians; combined with a more practical belief that their councils cannot be trusted to deliver value for money services, or the promises they make at election times.
- 2.34 Although most respondents have very little personal knowledge of their councillors, many expressed an almost intuitive distrust, feeling that they need to have more personal contact with their councillors if they are to trust them more.
- 2.35 Respondents felt that their council – both councillors and officers – make little effort to communicate with them. Many expressed the belief that councillors – of all political persuasions – rarely stick to their election promises.
- 2.36 Further, residents’ negative experiences of consultations engendered a belief that councils have their own agenda and will act on that, rather than on residents’ wishes.
- 2.37 Residents feel that they pay a high level of council tax, but do not see a commensurate high level of service provision. The issue of central government’s financial contribution to the cost of local government was only raised in one group, and many did not understand its impact. Many asked why, when council tax continues to rise, they not see any improvements in service provision.
- 2.38 If residents are to have greater trust in their council, they want to see councillors prove that they have stuck to and delivered what they set out in their election manifestos. Residents will trust their council more when they see real changes in the environment and high quality services being delivered. Several respondents commented that “actions speak louder than words”.
- 2.39 Nonetheless, the issues of greater accessibility of council staff and honest and transparent communication were key points which were raised in all three strands of work. More clear, written communication was seen as important, if residents are to be able to hold their council accountable: in particular more information to explain exactly what the council said it would do and how much this would cost, compared with what they have actually done and how much it has cost.
- 2.40 A constant theme is that respondents would trust their councils more if they felt that their views were being heeded in consultation exercises.

## **CUSTOMER CARE**

- 2.41 In one strand of the work, respondents were asked to think about “customer service” or “customer care” in public sector bodies. Most respondents’ first reaction was that their council fails to offer good customer care. Many respondents are particularly critical of slow or poor switchboard service and the fact that staff rarely return calls promptly or efficiently.
- 2.42 However, when they think more carefully about it, many agreed that there were several areas in which customer care has been excellent. Most acknowledged that in their council, as with all large organisations, there are departments and staff that offer good customer care, and departments and individuals that do not. However, until they are asked to think about them, many examples are either taken for granted and expected, or otherwise not at the forefront of most residents’ minds.
- 2.43 In order for councils to improve their customer care, respondents felt that councils need improve the service that residents receive on the telephone or in response to written communications. This focus may have been a result of the fact that few people had had much experience of face-to-face contact with council staff.
- 2.44 Key calls for improvement were as follows:
- The switchboard operators need to be fast in picking up the phones, polite, efficient and capable of directing callers to the correct extension;
  - Staff within departments should be equipped with the knowledge to provide answers;
  - Calls should be returned within agreed time frames; and
  - Staff should accept greater responsibility for residents’ problems and queries, and be seen to be more proactive.
- 2.45 However, some residents felt that councils will never offer better customer service because unlike private sector companies and even the ex-public utilities, there is no competition to force them into action.

## **KEY LESSONS**

- 2.46 There is clear confusion amongst residents over who the local council is and what they do. Perceptions of the council are often based not only on the council, but also on the performance of other organisations and other factors outside of the council’s control. In addition, because residents are generally unaware of the range of services provided by the council, opinions are often based on a very narrow range of experiences, primarily issues surrounding liveability and “street scene”. Linked to this, many feel that they are not receiving value for money for their council tax.

- 2.47 Given that only a small proportion of those interviewed had had much contact with the council, for many, perceptions appear to be mainly based on hearsay and media reports. With this in mind, it is not surprising that respondents are more positive about the council in areas which actively manage their relationship with the local press. In general, there were calls for councils to provide clear, honest and transparent information on a range of issues, why particular policies have been adopted, how much they cost, etc. It was felt that such transparency would engender more trust amongst residents.
- 2.48 It is vital that, where residents are included in consultation exercises, that they are given adequate feedback and, where views cannot be taken on board, to be told why. Those who have expressed their views but feel that they have not been taken into account were amongst the most negative respondents participating in the research.
- 2.49 Almost all felt that councillors need to be more visible and seen to be connecting more with the communities they serve in order that they can provide real community leadership.
- 2.50 Respondents called for those working in the council to take responsibility for residents' problems and queries, and to be more proactive in responding to them.

# APPENDIX

## Sample Profile

In total, the three projects comprised 13 focus group discussions and two full-day workshops with residents in 13 local authorities in England.

Because of the slightly different objectives for each project, the samples were recruited slightly differently. The samples for each of the three stages are described below.

The first tranche of research aimed to inform the design of new modules of the BVPI User Satisfaction study. The technical details for this tranche of work are shown below:

### Technical Details: Tranche 1

Nine group discussions were convened between 25th October and 11th November 2004.

The geographical locations of the groups were chosen to reflect a number of variables:

- A mixture of groups in the North of England, the Midlands and the South
- Urban/rural locations
- Local authorities with a range of CPA scores
- Single and two tier authorities

Because the findings of this research feed into the next tranche of research, some of the locations were chosen to reflect the objectives of that tranche. Specifically, two groups were conducted in areas which had performed well in their CPA rating, but had achieved low satisfaction scores at BV3 in the most recent round of BVPI surveys (Groups 3 and 4). Similarly, two groups were conducted in areas which had performed less well in their CPA rating, but had achieved high satisfaction scores (Groups 1 and 2).

One group (Group 9) was found to be unrepresentative of the types of people we were seeking to interview, so an additional group discussion (Group 4) was convened to replace it. However, the data from Group 9 was retained, and was added into the overall analysis.

All groups were held in the evenings, in neutral venues like community centres. Professional focus group recruiters were employed to recruit respondents through a mixture of face-to-face and telephone contact.

Five groups were recruited so that they comprised a good, general mix of residents in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. However, in the other four groups, quotas were set on the age of potential respondents, so that two of the groups were 'younger' residents, and two were 'older' residents.

The overall sample is shown in Table A.

**Table A: Profile of sample: Tranche 1**

Group	Type of LA	Urban/Rural	Region	CPA Score	Age group
Group 1	Unforeseen 'high' achiever	Urban	North/Midlands	Weak	Mixed
Group 2	Unforeseen 'high' achiever	Rural	South/Midlands	Fair	Mixed
Group 3	Unforeseen 'high' achiever	Urban	South/Midlands	Good	Mixed
Group 4	Unforeseen 'high' achiever	Urban	South/Midlands	Good	Mixed
Group 5	Unitary/Met	Inner city	North	Weak	40+
Group 6	Two tier	Small town	South	Poor (County rated as 'good')	Under 30
Group 7	Two tier	Small town	North	Excellent (Group 7 County rated as 'excellent')	Under 40
Group 8	Unitary/Met	Suburbs	South	Good	40+
Group 9	Unforeseen 'low' achiever	Rural	North	Fair	Mixed

The next project aimed to further explore residents' views on local government with the aim of understanding why there are some 'mismatches' between CPA scores and BVPI local government user satisfaction figures. Technical details for this tranche of work are shown below.

### Technical Details: Tranche 2

A total of 35 respondents attended the four residents' group discussions. The overall socio-demographic profile of the residents who attended these groups can be summarised as follows:

21 males and 14 females attended the groups

Just over a third of respondents were in their teens or twenties, a third were in their thirties, and just under a third in their forties, fifties and sixties

Of the 35 respondents, 28 were working (FT or PT), one respondent was retired, 5 were not working, and one was a full-time student

17 residents had school-aged children living at home.

Basic information regarding respondents' usage of services was gathered to stimulate their thinking around local authority services; and

to ensure that a mix of user views were covered. The information was used to ensure that a range of experiences were represented in the residents' groups.

The top three most used services were transport (n=29), environmental services (n=26), and cultural/leisure services (n=21). Other services, such as personal social services, planning services, housing, and benefits were used less frequently by residents attending the focus groups.

The composition of the groups is shown in Table B.

<b>Table B: Profile of sample: Tranche 2</b>				
<b>Location</b>	<b>CPA/BV3</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Total</b>
Borough Council, North	Good CPA / Low BV3	34 and under	Mixed	9
Borough Council, South	Good CPA / Low BV3	34 and under	Mixed	8
City Council, Midlands	Weak CPA / High BV3	Mixed	Mixed	8
District Council, South	Weak CPA / High BV3	Mixed	Mixed	10

The third project specifically aimed to explore issues raised in two ‘Daughter Documents’ published by ODPM (now DCLG) in January 2005: “Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter” and “Vibrant Local Leadership”. Technical details for this tranche of work are shown below.

<b>Technical Details: Tranche 3</b>
<p>Residents attended a full-day (6-hour) workshop, each comprising around 20 participants. Professional focus group recruiters were employed to recruit respondents through a mixture of face-to-face and telephone contact. Quotas were set to ensure a good mix of residents in terms of gender, age, working status and ethnicity. In addition, quotas were set on levels of contact with the council. Current and former local authority employees were excluded from the workshops, as were any community leaders and residents who had attended a focus group within the last year. As a thank you for their time respondents were given a £75 cash incentive. All 20 respondents recruited to each workshop attended.</p> <p>The workshops included whole-group and breakout group sessions, and followed the general programme outlined below:</p> <p>The same voting questions were administered at the start and at the end of the sessions to enable comparisons to be made and for respondents to discuss and explore reasons for changes.</p> <p>Breakout groups in the morning covered issues of neighbourhood engagement. Afternoon sessions differed depending on location: in the West Midlands the afternoon sessions looked at empowerment and how the proposed neighbourhood arrangements might work; afternoon sessions in the North West looked at issues around local leadership. Groups were allocated on the basis of age to allow us to make comparisons between older and younger respondents.</p> <p>The workshops were conducted in late November 2005.</p> <p>A total of 40 residents attended the two workshops. The profile of the residents who attended is shown in the table below:</p>

<b>Profile of sample: Tranche 3</b>			
		<b>North West</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>
Gender	Male	8	9
	Female	12	11
Age	20s	5	5
	30s	4	3
	40s & 50s	8	7
	60s	3	5
Social Grade	ABC1	9	9
	C2DE	11	11
Usage of Council Services	Intensive	8	5
	Transactional	7	10
	Collective/Citizens	5	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>
<p>Intensive users of council services are defined as those who said they use any of the following services 'all the time': public transport; local authority housing services (e.g. Council housing or other public housing services); housing benefit, council tax benefit, etc.; OR social services for children, older people or people with disabilities.</p> <p>Transactional users use any of the following services 'all the time' or 'occasionally': cultural and leisure services (e.g. libraries, leisure centres, theatres, museums); OR local council planning services.</p> <p>All other residents were classified as 'collective users' or 'citizens'. The qualitative recruiters mentioned that they had some difficulties in recruiting collective users/citizens, mainly because many of the people they approached were heavy users of public transport. However, this may reflect the urban nature of the areas in which the workshops were run.</p>			