# what drives public satisfaction with local government?

**Acknowledgements**

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# executive summary and implications for the LGA

Ratings of local government fluctuate over time, with perceptions of the institution consistently less well regarded than individual service areas. Latest findings show signs of a potential recovery after notable declines in ratings since the late 1990s.

When asked to identify reasons for satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with their local authority, residents typically find it difficult to pinpoint specific reasons, highlighting the complex set of issues which underpin a council's reputation.

If an authority is perceived to provide generally good quality services and good value for money, then it is highly likely to also achieve strong satisfaction ratings. Indeed, perceptions on these attributes are consistently shown to be the strongest drivers of overall satisfaction across different studies and across key sub-groups within the population.

Communications are likely to be key here. There is a lack of correlation between levels of council tax (both overall figures and relative increases) and overall satisfaction, whilst ratings of specific services have less impact on overall satisfaction than does the overall impression of service delivery. How residents feel about service delivery (most of which they will not use directly) and value for money is likely to be shaped by direct council communications and local press coverage.

MORI have consistently emphasised the importance of good communications. Further analysis supports previous findings from the Connecting with Communities[1] initiative which demonstrated the impact that good communications can have on overall ratings of an authority. To be successful, communications must focus on the issues that are shown to impact on residents' perceptions; quality of services, value for money, and efficiencies. They should ideally look to close the communication-consultation loop, ie tell people how they can have a say and demonstrate how those who have given their views have had a real impact.

High visibility 'streetscene' services have the biggest impact of all individual service areas on overall regard of an authority - particularly ratings of street cleaning (on which there are relatively large variations in performance across authorities). Ratings of services related to local development are also fairly prominent, reflecting general concerns about developmental issues in local areas.

Good customer care is clearly of fundamental importance to any organisation, and analysis here shows that satisfaction ratings among those residents who have had direct contact with their authority are just as strongly influenced by the way the contact is handled as by the outcome of the contact.

Research undertaken for the recent *Frontiers of Performance 2* report[2] again underlined the importance that external factors can play in setting parameters for satisfaction levels within local areas. Relative levels of deprivation and ethnic fractionalisation are shown to be strong predictors of satisfaction ratings within a local authority area.

This report highlights some key areas where further collection of data would be helpful in providing evidence to explore various hypotheses around the drivers of satisfaction:

- residents knowledge of (comparative) council tax levels/rises;

- the impact of local media coverage;

- the link between the views of staff and those of local residents;

- the link with perceptions of national government (perhaps factoring in dimensions such as voting intention).

**Figure 1: most important drivers of satisfaction with local authorities - potential model**

Greatest drivers of overall
satisfaction

| **Perceived quality of services** |

| **Perceived value for money** |

| **Local area/deprivation /diversity** |

| **Media coverage** |

| **Direct communication** |

Weaker drivers of
overall satisfaction

| **Street cleaning/liveability** |

| **Positive experiences of contact with staff** |
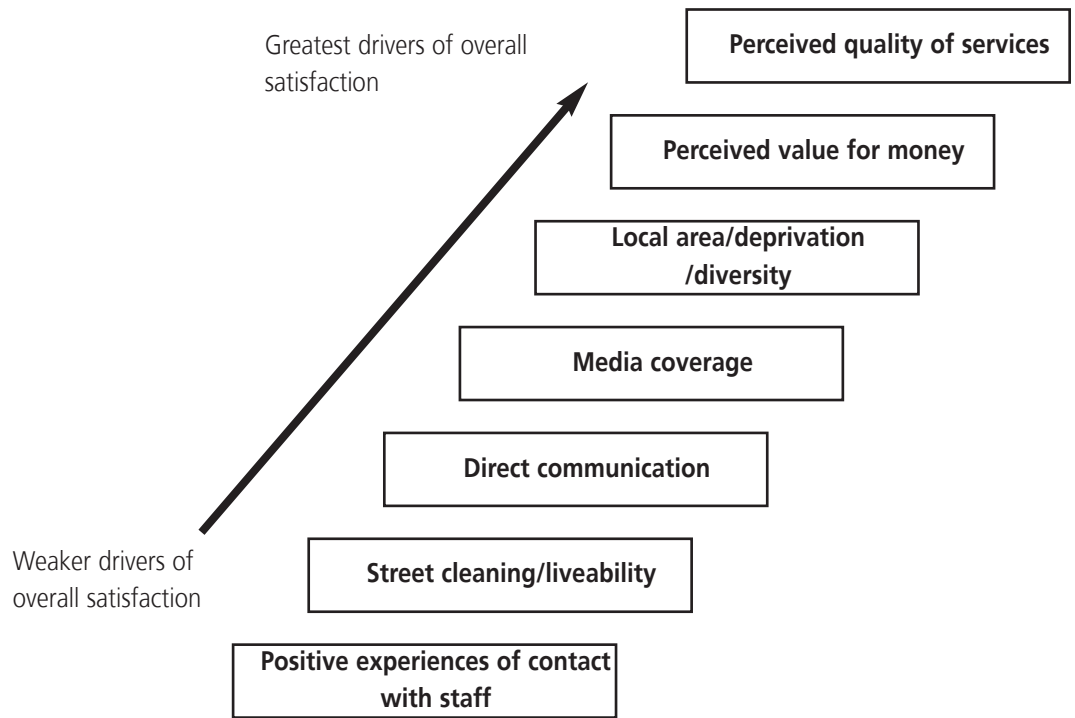
### Implications for the LGA

The research highlights some key challenges facing the Local Government Association (LGA). The first is the need to formally agree, collectively, not only that the problem of poor perception exists, and damages the credibility of local government's arguments, but secondly that **collective** and **focussed** action is vital. While much has been achieved in the last seven years, only a radical shift has any chance of improving local government's reputation.

The obvious areas for focus in terms of building reputation among local communities are:

• streetscene and liveability services;

• communications - explaining effectively what is being delivered and how to get it;

• contact - exceeding expectations on responsiveness, empathy and getting things right first time; and

• perceived value for money, explaining clearly where money is going.

If local government collectively agreed to focus on delivering these services/aspects to a high standard, its reputation would improve.

At a national level, a concerted public relations (PR) and advertising campaign should again be considered, linking a consistent set of messages that each council should broadcast across the country, alongside national PR and advertising. This could involve all member authorities consistently communicating key messages.

In terms of government and media attitudes the LGA itself will play a vital role in demonstrating the hard evidence about local government performance, and its superiority to centralised alternative delivery mechanisms. As the LGA's 2003 perceptions audit[3] highlights, opinion formers want to see more incisive, well-thought through, carefully argued, evidence-based policy suggestions out of the association.

[3]*'Maintaining the momentum'* **is available on LGA's website at www.lga.gov.uk**

# introduction

## Background and objectives

This aim of this research report is to develop current thinking around key drivers of public satisfaction with local authorities. Secondary analysis has been undertaken to identify which factors have the strongest effect on people's overall levels of satisfaction with their local authority. The focus is on the overall satisfaction rating given its relevance to local authorities as a key Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) measure.

Via the analysis, the research explores the extent to which local authorities can influence perceptions of their organisation (eg by improving service delivery and communications) and how much is beyond their control (eg due to local area factors such as deprivation or ethnic fractionalisation).

The analysis has been conducted looking at key areas which have repeatedly been highlighted in existing research by MORI and others. Firstly, **internal factors** such as:

- key image attributes of the authority as perceived by residents - eg the impact of perceptions around value for money, being remote and impersonal, and ratings of overall quality of service provision;

- communications - eg the link between how well informed people feel about their local authority and how positive they are towards it, as well as the impact of specific communication mechanisms;

- service provision - eg how satisfied people are with performance on key services such as street cleaning, education, cultural and leisure services and how this impacts on satisfaction at a corporate level;

- contact with local authority - eg which aspects of customer care have greatest impact and the extent to which satisfaction with contact (process and outcome) impacts on overall perceptions;

- levels of council tax - eg to what extent is there a link between council tax levels (both absolute and level of change) and perceptions of an authority;

- image of councillors - eg perceptions of trust in and satisfaction with councillors.

  Secondly, **external factors** are considered, such as:

- local area factors - eg Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score and local levels of ethnic fractionalisation/diversity - as highlighted in MORI's *Frontiers of Performance* reports;

- impact of perceptions of national government.

The chapters in this report are set out to mirror the sets of factors above. Clearly this list is not exhaustive - for example, from working for the Department of Health and the Home Office, experience has shown that media coverage has a clear and measurable effect on organisations like the NHS, and on fear of crime, and will also impact on local government. However, there is currently a lack of research to explore such a link here.

## Sources

Separate sources have been used in order to identify trends *across* local authorities (which allow us to identify the factors which may explain the variations in satisfaction ratings across authorities), as well as trends within individual surveys which allow a more thorough look at differences by sub-groups of the population.

Data from the following secondary sources are used to identify which factors have the strongest effect on residents' overall satisfaction with their local authority. Only data from English and Welsh local authorities from 1998 onwards has been included.

## MORI Norms Database

MORI Social Research Institute has constructed a dataset that includes satisfaction scores from MORI surveys for over 150 individual authorities across England and Wales including information on a range of variables (such as service provision and communications from local authorities).

### Individual authority data

Throughout the report we have referenced findings from various individual surveys for different authorities in England and Wales. These have been anonymised.

### BVPI data

MORI holds data for all English local authorities from the BVPI surveys conducted in 2000/1 and has access to over 100 authorities' 2003/04 data.

### Best Value Evaluation study 2001

The initial wave of the Best Value Evaluation study for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) was conducted in 2001 and covered a number of question areas that are highly relevant to this review. The dataset of over 2,500 interviews allows scope for robust sub-group analysis.

### MORI Omnibus

A nationally representative survey of 2,000+ people aged 16+. Conducted fortnightly face-to-face.

### Connecting with Communities

Reference is made to the Connecting with Communities project that MORI worked on alongside ODPM, IDeA, LGA, and the Audit Commission.

### People's Panel

Wave five of the People's Panel consisted of 1,086 face-to-face interviews with panel members conducted in March/April 2000.

### Council tax data

Information on levels of council tax across English and Welsh local authorities has been obtained from the Institute of Public Finance (IPF).

## Analysis conducted

In producing this report we have used a range of analytical approaches.

### Correlation analysis

Conducting correlation analysis can provide a strong indication of the type of factors that are driving overall satisfaction. Although this type of analysis does not factor in variations on other variables, we can still gain an understanding of what factors have the most influence by comparing the relative levels of correlation.

Correlation is a standard statistical measurement of the degree of relationship or association between two sets of numbers (variables) to describe how closely they are related to one another. The notion does not necessarily imply causation since no direction of influence is known or can be assumed. In fact, often both variables are 'caused' by some other independent variable(s) not being measured.

Correlation is calculated as a number ranging between -1.00 and +1.00. A measure of +/- 1.00 represents a perfect positive or negative correlation, indicating that the two sets of numbers form an identical pattern. An example of a +1.00 correlation coefficient might be a comparison of two sets of numbers where one set represents the inches in height of a group of individuals while another set represents the centimetres in height of the same group of individuals.) A measure of -1.00 represents perfect negative correlation, indicating that the two sets of numbers form a perfect inverse relationship. It is rare to find correlations of + or - 1.00 in social research. A correlation of 0.00 means there is no relationship whatever between the variables.

**Key drivers analysis**

This analysis uses regression techniques to identify the key drivers of satisfaction with local authorities. This approach avoids relying on the stated level of importance of each factor from the respondent, and instead uses statistical techniques to identify those factors which have the strongest underlying relationship with overall views.

Using these regression techniques, we are able to investigate the key drivers of satisfaction with local authorities. These drivers can also be interpreted as 'predictors', in as much as a high positive (negative) score on one of these factors is associated with a relatively high (low) level of satisfaction with an authority. Key drivers analysis also calculates the overall 'fit' of the model, which is displayed as a percentage. The nearer this percentage is to 100, the better the fit of the model, in terms of the power of the included 'predictors' in explaining satisfaction with local authorities.

The results presented in this report show the relative importance of the statistically significant factors in each model in 'explaining' or 'predicting' the variation in the dependent variable (eg satisfaction with the way the local authority is running the area), scaled to 100. A minus sign illustrates that the factor is negatively related to satisfaction, a plus sign reflects a positive relationship.

# where are we now?

There is both good and bad in the latest public opinion ratings of local government. While the 2003-4 BVPI survey results show an average 10 point fall in overall satisfaction since 2000-2001, a swathe of councils have bucked the national trend, and either maintained or increased satisfaction over this period.

It is too early to say yet, but MORI's regular tracking is also beginning to show a glimmer of hope. Our most recent national study shows a marked improvement in national perceptions (albeit still at a low level). However, until this is sustained, caution is essential. This comes after a disastrous 2003, when some months saw figures as low as those recorded during the poll tax era, and a period of decline from the high-water mark of optimism in 1997.

Figure 2 shows the trends in overall satisfaction with local councils, using BVPI scores, the average scores from MORI resident surveys and an overall measure from the MORI omnibus (in which respondents are asked to rate their "local council" rather than a named authority - which explains, in part, why scores are generally lower). BVPI scores are typically higher since the question on overall satisfaction is asked mid-way through the questionnaire once the respondent has been informed of their local authority's responsibilities. In MORI's face-to-face work with local authorities, the question on overall satisfaction is asked up-front in order to obtain a top-of-mind measure.

**Figure 2: satisfaction with council - trends**



% Net satisfied
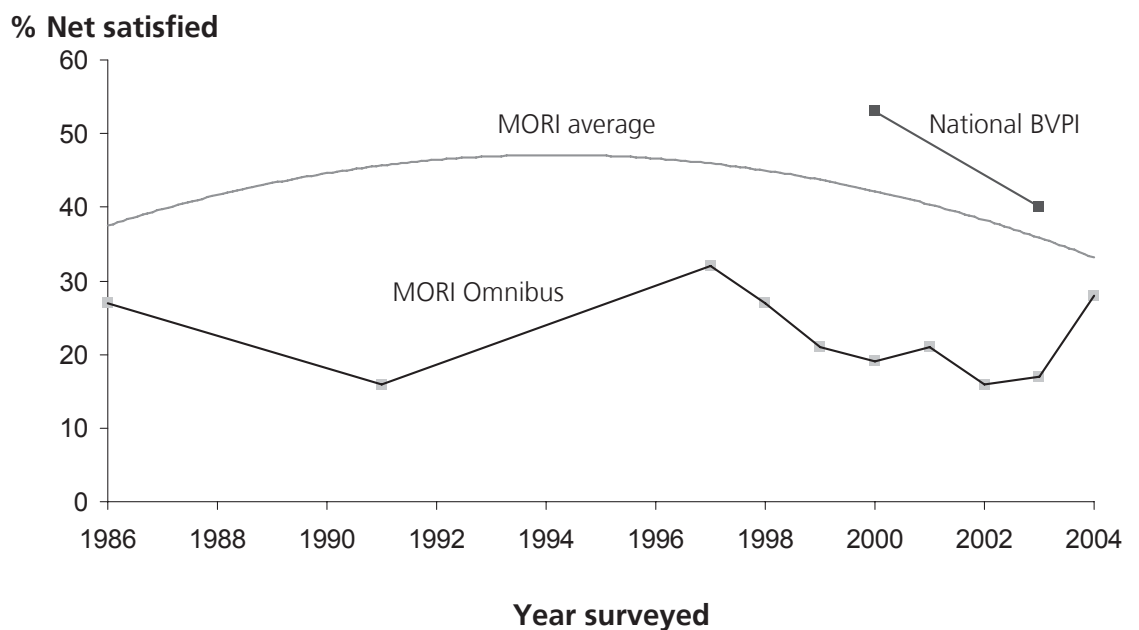
Ratings of individual councils remain low relative to the services they provide, highlighting key issues around image and reputation of local authorities. We see overall satisfaction among the public with some core services at around the 70-80 per cent level among service users, but the institution much less well regarded. So whenever one talks in the abstract about local government things look worse.

In the remainder of this report we aim to identify what drives satisfaction with local councils in England and Wales - what criteria the public use in judging local authorities.

# what criteria do the public use to judge local government?

In trying to identify the drivers of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with local authorities, the simple solution would appear to be to ask people directly about the reasons behind their response. However, as the following examples show (tables 1-3), many cannot highlight a reason for their (dis)satisfaction, and responses which are put forward tend to be fairly vague whilst covering a range of issues:

- some relevant service-specific issues, typically around liveability (eg refuse collection, street cleaning, community safety);

- perceived inefficiencies, lack of value for money and lack of consultation/communication;

- broader issues which reflect the local area more generally, rather than any council-specific themes (ambience/atmosphere of area, etc);

- services and activities which are outside the authority's control (eg policing).

Indeed, residents often find it fairly difficult to pinpoint the reasons behind their satisfaction rating, highlighting the complex set of factors which underpin a council's reputation.

Whilst providing an important reminder about the lack of understanding residents typically have about their local authority (thereby serving to emphasise the ongoing importance of good communications), these responses in themselves provide limited value in explaining why some authorities are rated better/worse than others. To develop a more thorough understanding of what drives satisfaction with local councils, it is imperative to identify the covert drivers by looking at the relationships between residents' responses on other questions about their local authority and their overall satisfaction rating. This type of analysis forms the basis of the remaining sections of this report.

**Table 1: reasons for satisfaction – Northern unitary 2004**

|  | % stating as a reason |
| --- | --- |
| Quiet area | 26 |
| Good/no problems | 25 |
| Good refuse/rubbish collection | 25 |
| Clean/tidy/street cleanliness | 22 |
| General appearance of area/nice area | 21 |
| Provide good services (non -specific) | 15 |

**Table 2: reasons stated for dissatisfaction**

|  | % stating as a reason |
|---|---|
| *Southern county council 2003* |  |
| Don't consult us/listen to us | 30 |
| Council tax too high | 25 |
| Council wastes money/inefficient | 20 |
| Poor roads/pavements | 18 |
| Poor street cleaning | 18 |
| Poor traffic management/congestion problems | 16 |
| Council never gets things done quickly enough | 14 |
| Parking problems | 14 |
| Poor police presence | 14 |

**Table 3: reasons stated for dissatisfaction**

|  | % stating as a reason |
|---|---|
| *Northern unitary 2004* |  |
| Town centre dirty/run down/lost character | 27 |
| Lack of investment in area/nothing done here/no modernisation | 18 |
| Waste money/not spent on necessities | 15 |
| Poor facilities for children/teenagers | 15 |
| Unruly youths/children | 14 |
| Dirty/untidy/poor street cleaning | 14 |
| Poor shops/closure of shops | 14 |
| General dissatisfaction/could do better | 13 |
| Vandalism | 12 |
| Poor policing | 11 |

# key image attributes

Asking residents to rate their local authority on a number of key image attributes can provide greater depth of understanding than asking for a single overall satisfaction measure. MORI have consistently gauged residents' ratings of their local council on a number of key dimensions, typically using an agree-disagree scale:

- value for money;

- quality of services;

- remote and impersonal.

The baseline survey for the ODPM evaluation of Best Value included some additional statements:

- delivers services efficiently;

- meets the service standards it sets itself;

- sets itself challenging service standards;

- treats all types of people fairly.

Analysis of MORI normative data shows that two key image attributes emerge as very strong predictors of overall satisfaction with a local authority. If someone agrees their authority **provides good quality services** or that it **gives good value for money**, then they are significantly more likely to be satisfied overall. Indeed, as later findings in this report show, these two attributes appear to be the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction of anything we have tested for within the analyses.

It is therefore important to understand what people define to be 'good quality services' or 'value for money'. The following chapters examine the relationship with ratings of individual services, and actual levels of council tax, to provide some further insight.

Communications plays a key role in allowing people to make up their minds on these factors. The majority of people will be unlikely to use more than a handful of council services, and few will know how their council tax bill compares with others across the country. Therefore, it is likely that communications (via the council or other sources) will have some bearing on people's ratings on these factors. As can be seen from figure 3 those who feel well informed by their council are more likely to feel they give good value for money.

**Figure 3: net satisfaction with value for money vs net feel informed about council**

**±% Net satisfaction with value**



**±% Net feel informed about council**
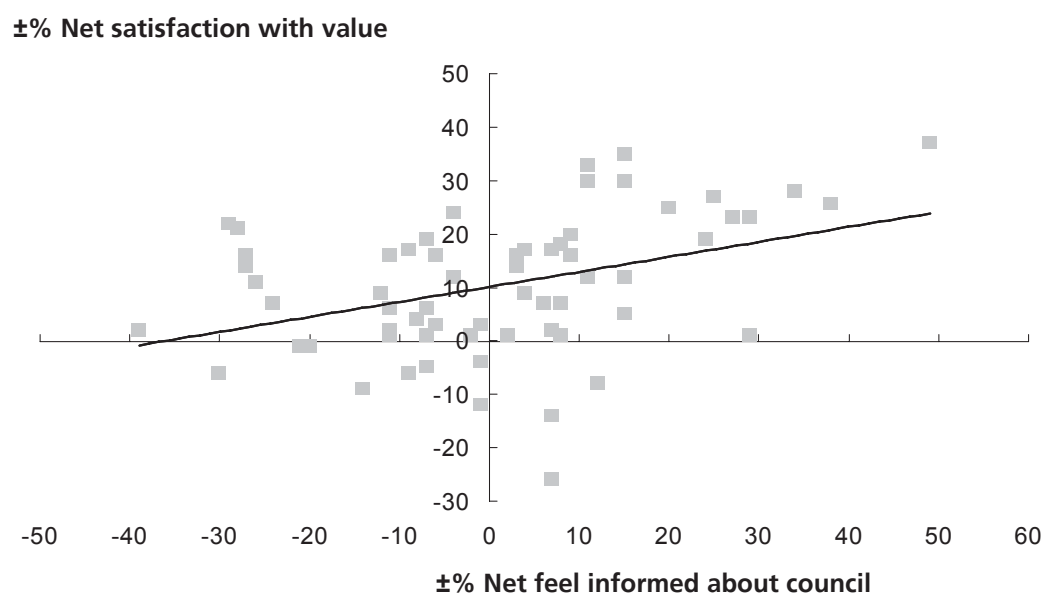
As one would expect, the more likely authorities are being perceived as **remote and impersonal** then the lower their overall satisfaction ratings among local residents. Whilst there is a correlation, the relationship is not as strong as either ratings of overall service provision or value for money (as shown in figure 4).

The R2 figures in the chart indicate the level of correlation between each of the factors and overall satisfaction. This higher the figure (ie closer to 1), the more closely the factor is related to overall satisfaction. As highlighted in the introduction, correlation is the measurement of the degree of relationship or association between two sets of numbers (variables) to describe how closely they are related to one another.

These correlations are also evident when analysing data from the Best Value baseline survey, indicating that perceptions of overall quality of services and value for money are strong predictors of overall levels of satisfaction, whether we are looking at the views of individuals within a single survey or aggregated results across surveys.

From the Best Value evaluation data, **efficient service delivery** also emerges as a strong positive predictor of overall satisfaction, as does **meeting service standards, setting challenging service standards** and **treating people fairly**.

**Figure 4: net satisfaction with council vs net satisfaction with value for money, service provision and perception of remote and impersonal**

**±% Net overall satisfaction with council**



Value for money
$R^2 = 0.4509$

Perceived service provision
$R^2 = 0.6808$

Too remote and impersonal
$R^2 = 0.2489$

**±% Net satisfaction with value for money, service provision and remoteness**
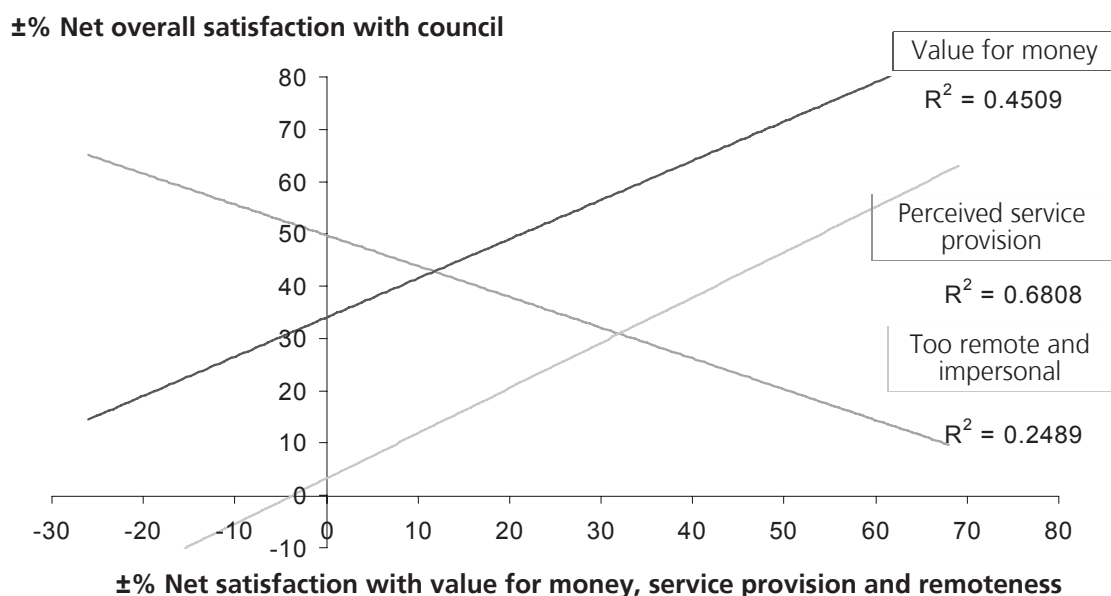
# communication and consultation

MORI surveys for local authorities have consistently indicated that those councils that are more effective at explaining what they do tend to be better regarded. This is a key reason put forward by ODPM in explaining some of the variations in the recent BVPI results, as they put it "*potential improvements in satisfaction levels are demonstrated by councils which have concentrated on communicating with residents*".

As part of the Connecting with Communities work MORI collated data on communications and overall perceptions of local authorities collected between 1997-2002. Findings showed that:

- the majority of residents know little about their local council, so that ratings of performance are typically based on incomplete or incorrect perceptions of the role of local authorities;

- regard for council services is often somewhat confused because of a lack of distinction over who is responsible for providing specific services;

- residents perceive service delivery to be the key role of local councils and place less importance on any community leadership function;

- people are divided in their perceptions of how much impact their local council has on quality of life in their local area - with as many saying it does not play an important part in improving quality of life, as saying it does;

- most people are content to take a passive interest in the activities of their local council: they like to know what the council is doing but are happy to let them get on with their job. Those who are more dissatisfied are more likely to want an active voice;

- there is a huge diversity of performance on communications across local authorities, with major variations in the proportions of residents who feel well informed by their local council (as the 2003/04 BVPI results will show);

- those who feel that they are well informed by their council tend to be more positive about the authority on a wide range of issues. They are much less likely to feel that the council is remote and impersonal or out of touch with local people, and are more likely to feel that the authority offers local people good value for money and provides a good quality of service overall. Improving communications can have a positive impact on these specific image ratings and also on overall satisfaction levels (table 4 overleaf).

## Council magazines/newspapers

Previous MORI research has shown that the most frequently cited (and also most preferred) channels of council information tend to be council newspapers/newsletters, local newspapers and leaflets posted through the door.

Recall rates of council magazines/newspapers vary between 40 per cent and 95 per cent. This may reflect various factors such as time of the year, frequency of distribution, salience of issues reported or effectiveness of distribution. Analysis in this review shows that the proportion of residents who read their local council's newspaper/magazine is not a strong predictor of overall satisfaction ratings (other factors having a more significant impact), but it is a key method for communication with large proportions of the local public.

## The impact of (local) media

There remains a lack of hard empirical evidence around the impact that local media coverage of authorities has on residents' perceptions. Whilst often referred to anecdotally as a reason for a drop in satisfaction ratings, it would be fruitful for future studies to investigate the impact that particular coverage has on overall ratings of the council and those of specific services. A recent review of local authority communications indicated that 77 per cent of authorities claim to monitor/evaluate the impact of their media work (*LGA/MORI Local Government Communications*

*Survey 2004*). The next step will be to link these measures with public perception ratings (although the perception ratings would need to be collected at regular intervals to enable accurate comparisons).

However, MORI does have clear evidence from work for government departments that media have a major impact on perceptions of health services and policing, and it is highly unlikely that local government will be unaffected.

### Closing the loop - feeding back consultation findings

Analysis of the findings from the Best Value Evaluation baseline survey indicates that the extent to which people feel their local council takes residents' views into account when making decisions is a stronger predictor of overall satisfaction than feeling informed per se (table 4).

Of course, communications are again key, with residents reliant on being told how they can have a say and following the consultation process, how their views have had an impact (they are rarely likely to be able to make such a link themselves).

Again, the higher the 'strength of correlation' in the table, then the more closely the aspect is linked to overall satisfaction ratings.

It also highlights a key message to local communities as a whole (not just consultees): your council **listens** and **acts** on what you say (and explains why it can't act, when appropriate).

**Table 4: correlation between overall satisfaction and aspects of information provision/ consultation**

|  | Strength of correlation |
|---|---|
| Satisfaction with opportunities for participation in decision -making | *0.40* |
| Takes residents views into account a lot when makin g decisions | *0.37* |
| Local people have a say in how services provided | *0.33* |
| Feel informed about how well  council performing | *0.33* |
| Feel informed about the  services and benefits it provides | *0.31* |
| Council need to make more effort to find out what local peop le want | *0.28* |

*Source: Best Value Evaluation Baseline Survey 2001*

# the impact of specific services

## Universal services

We have seen how ratings of service delivery on the whole are a strong predictor of overall satisfaction with an authority. This section looks at how ratings of individual services may help to explain differences in overall satisfaction ratings of local authorities.

Liveability factors have been highlighted in previous research as being of most importance to residents and have seen evidence from different authorities of how increases or decreases in the ratings of key services has appeared to have had a significant impact on overall image ratings (see figure 5).

**Figure 5: street cleaning vs overall satisfaction**

*Q   Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local Council?*



National average level of satisfaction with street cleaning

National average level of satisfaction with local council

**Year surveyed**

Base: All residents
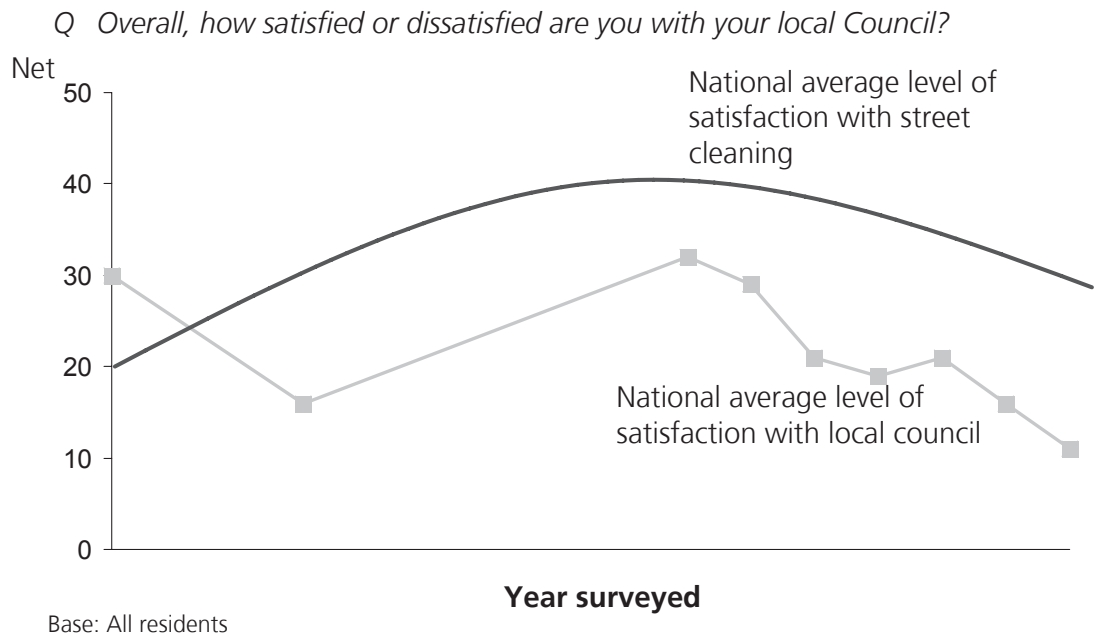
As part of the analyses for this report, we have identified the strength of correlations between ratings of individual services and overall satisfaction across different authorities. Again, 'cleaner, greener, safer' issues are the strongest drivers of residents' overall perceptions of their local authority, in particular, ratings of street cleaning.

Ratings of refuse collection are less of a predictor of overall satisfaction with an authority, reflecting the fact that although this service is often highlighted as very important to residents, it is typically well rated across most authorities and therefore ratings are uniformly high. Rating of recycling also appears to be a weaker predictor of overall satisfaction (see figure 6).

**Figure 6: net satisfaction with council vs net satisfaction with street cleaning, recycling and refuse collection**

**±% Net overall satisfaction with council**

Street cleaning
$R^2 = 0.293$

Recycling
$R^2 = 0.0943$

Refuse collection
$R^2 = 0.0176$

**±% Net satisfaction with streets, recycling and refuse**
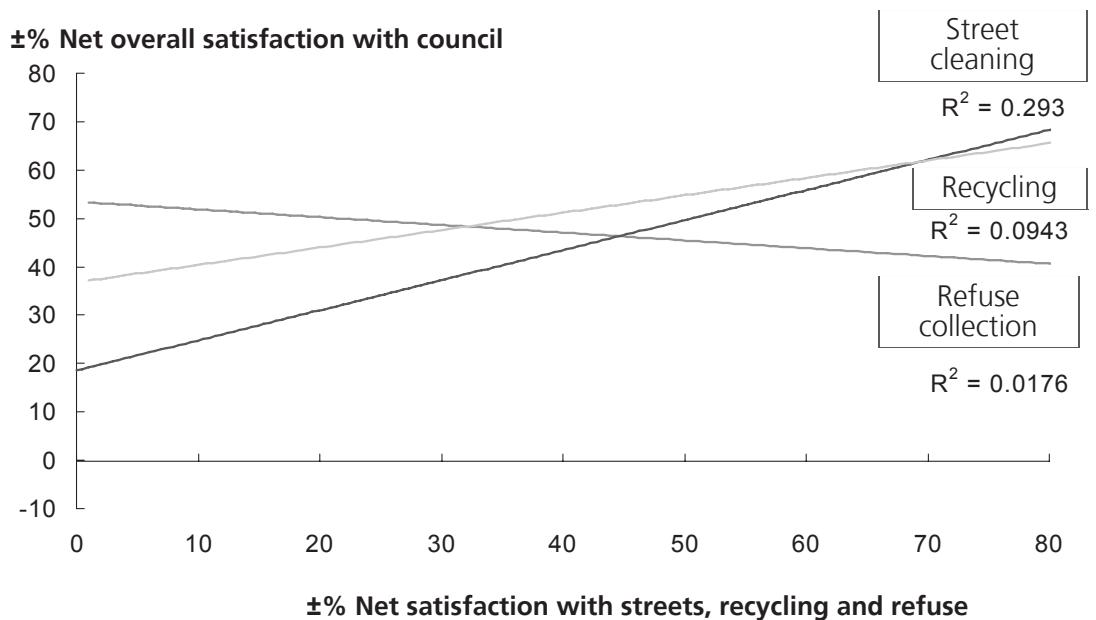
These findings are mirrored by those from analysis of the Best Value evaluation baseline survey data, where satisfaction with street cleaning shows a stronger relationship with overall satisfaction than do ratings of recycling or refuse collection (table 5).

Issues around local development are also prevalent here. Satisfaction with control of development and handling of planning applications emerge as factors which have a relatively strong correlation with overall satisfaction with an authority. Bearing in mind that the majority of local residents will not have had any direct contact with these services, they reflect wider concerns around development issues in local areas and again highlight the impact that perceptions of these more general local issues (over which local councils will have only limited control) can have on perceptions of the local authority. There is a strong relationship between how satisfied people are with their area as a place to live and their local council, which is explored elsewhere in this report.

**Table 5: correlation between overall satisfaction and satisfaction with individual services**

|  | Correlation with overall net satisfaction with council (MORI norms – across councils) | BV evaluation (single survey) |
|---|---|---|
| Satisfaction with control of development in the local area | - | *0.37* |
| Satisfaction with handling of planning applications | - | *0.33* |
| Satisfaction with street cleaning | 0.29 | *0.30* |
| Satisfaction with recycling | 0.09 | *0.19* |
| Satisfaction with refuse collection | 0.02 | *0.18* |

## Other services

Specifically among service users, views of local
secondary schools appear a fairly reliable predictor
of overall satisfaction with a local authority, while
primary schools and leisure services are only
weakly correlated with overall satisfaction.
However, in the grand scheme of things, most
residents are not users of any of these services, so
their overall impact is limited.

**Figure 7: net satisfaction with council vs net satisfaction with secondary schools, primary schools
and leisure services**

**±% Net overall satisfaction with council**



Secondary schools
$R^2 = 0.3011$

Primary schools
$R^2 = 0.0595$

Leisure services
$R^2 = 0.034$
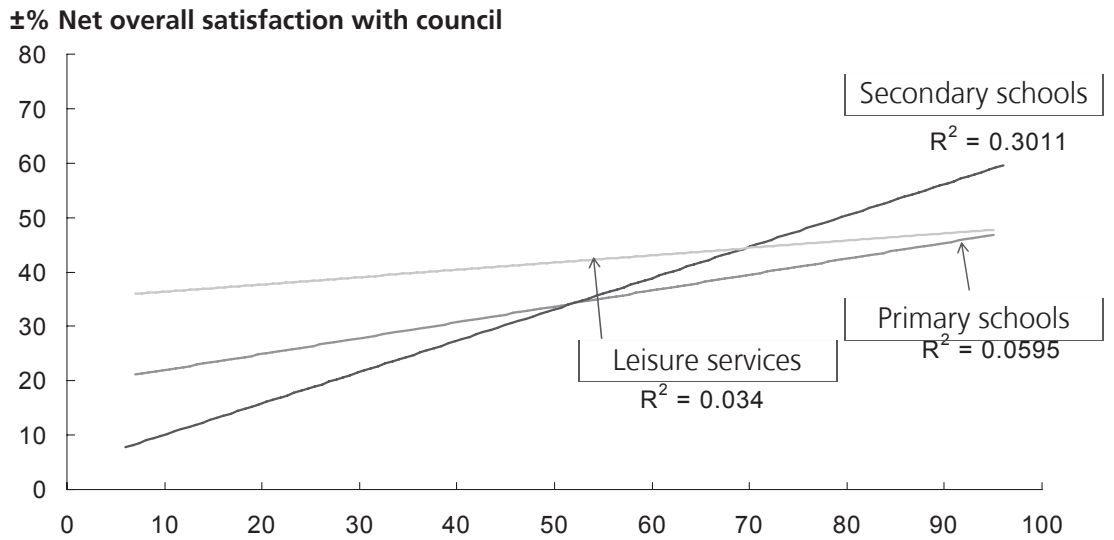
Base: Users          **±% Net satisfaction with leisure services, secondary and primary schools**

# contact with residents

MORI surveys for individual authorities have always shown that residents who have had direct contact with their local authority are less satisfied with overall performance than those who have not had any contact. This reflects the fact that those contacting councils are either complaining about something, or are more likely to be in need (and hence more critical of) a wide range of services.

Analysis of findings from different authorities indicates that satisfaction with the outcome of contact with the council is a moderate predictor of overall satisfaction with the authority (among those who contact them). Since not all residents will have had contact then we would not expect it to be a strong predictor overall.

**Figure 8: net satisfaction with council vs satisfaction with outcome of contact with council**

**% Overall satisfaction**

$R^2 = 0.1626$

**±% Satisfaction with contact**

Findings from the Best Value baseline survey indicate the importance of customer care on overall satisfaction ratings. Table 6 shows stark differences in overall ratings of authorities between those who are satisfied and those who are dissatisfied with either the outcome of the contact, or the way the contact was handled. Indeed, the **handling** of the contact appears to have just as much impact as the **outcome**, reaffirming the importance of good customer care.

Indeed, both of these factors are shown to have a relatively high correlation with overall satisfaction (0.34 and 0.33 respectively). However, even among this sub-set of people who have had direct recent contact with their council, perceptions around the overall quality of services, value for money and efficiency remain **stronger** predictors of overall satisfaction.

**Table 6: impact of customer care on overall satisfaction ratings**

|  | Satisfied with council overall | Dissatisfied with council overall |
|---|---|---|
| *Base: All who had contacted council in last year or so (1,097)* | % | % |
| **Outcome of contact** | | |
| Satisfied | 59 | 27 |
| Dissatisfied | 30 | 62 |
| **Handling of contact** | | |
| Satisfied | 70 | 34 |
| Dissatisfied | 24 | 57 |

# levels of council tax

Perceived value for money has a strong impact on perceptions of local councils. However, figures 9 and 10 show that the link between actual levels of council tax and overall satisfaction ratings of different authorities is significantly weaker, demonstrating that perceived value for money is about more than relative levels of council tax.

The following two charts (figures 9 and 10) show that there is a very weak correlation between overall satisfaction ratings (from a full set of BVPI surveys in 2000/01 and part dataset from the 2003/04 surveys) and overall levels of council tax. These charts use the overall council tax level for an area (including all precepts) - when we plot the precept from the authority in question (excluding precepts from other relevant local authorities) then the correlation is weaker still.

**Figure 9: overall satisfaction with council 2004 BVPI vs total council tax bill (2003-2004)**

**Overall satisfaction %**
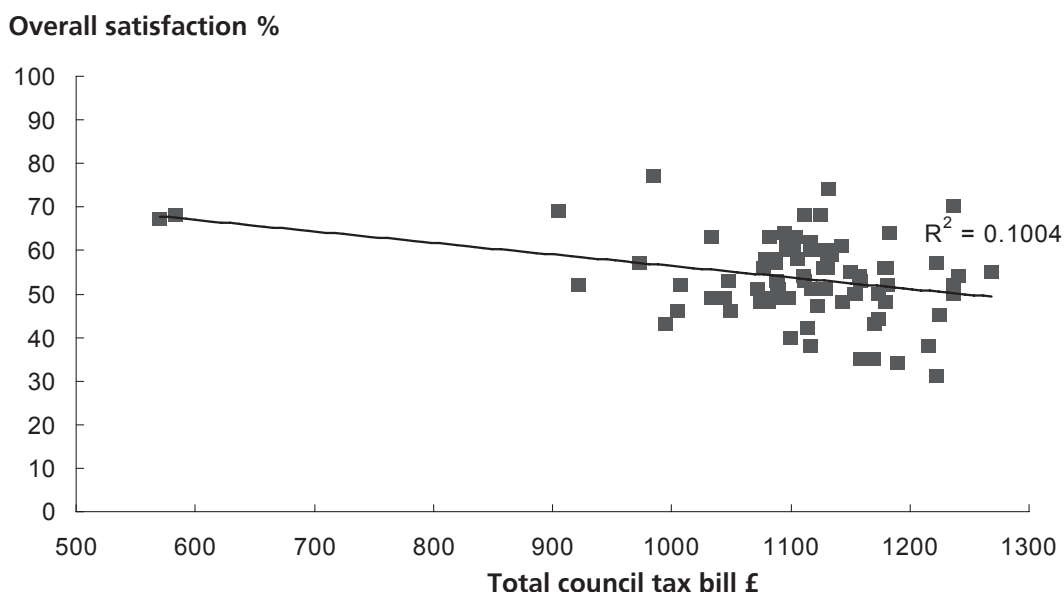


What this reflects is that it is not just the amount charged that matters, but rather whether residents know what they are getting for it, and whether they believe this is value for money.

**Figure 10: overall sastisfaction with council 2001 BVPI vs total council tax bill (2000-2001)**

**Overall satisfaction %**
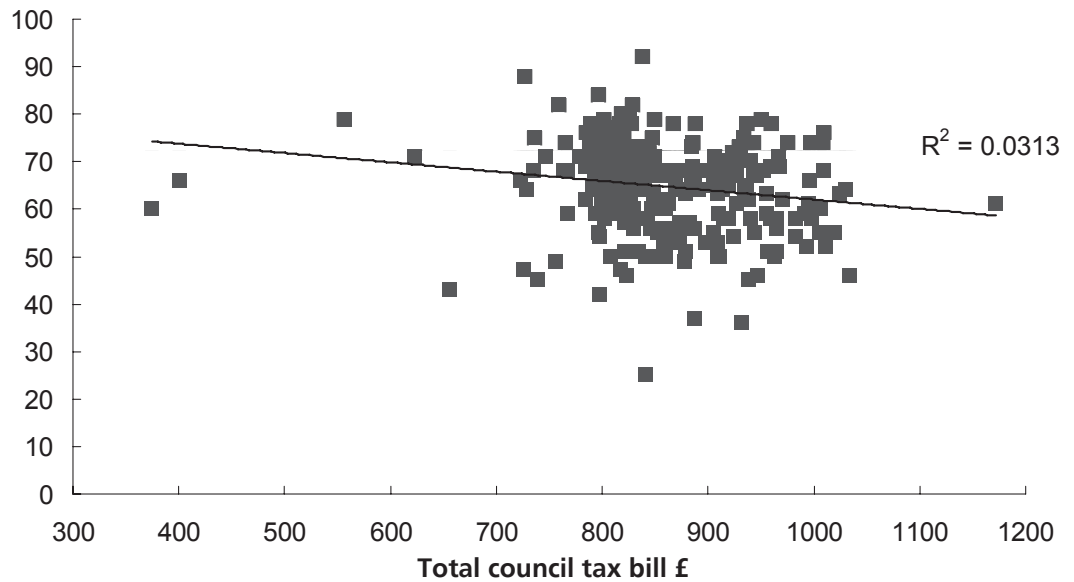


Plotting overall satisfaction against the relative rise
in overall council tax bills (in % terms) shows no
correlation.

**Figure 11: overall satisfaction with council 2004 BVPI vs percentage change in total council tax bill [(2002-2003)-2003-2004)]**

**Overall satisfaction %**
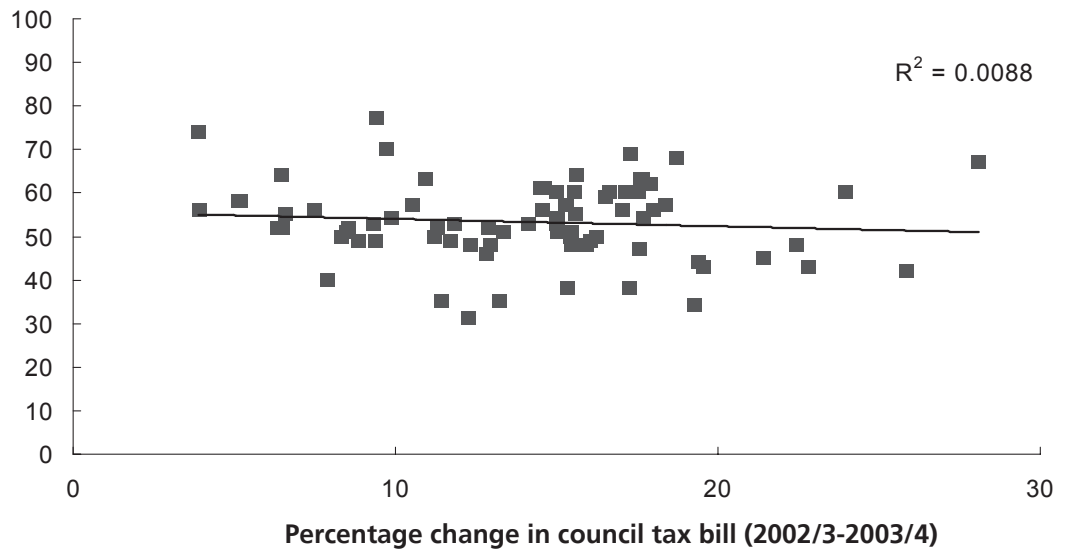
These findings suggest that absolute levels of council tax and the increases year on year do not significantly impact upon levels of satisfaction per se. However, what we do not know is how much local residents actually know about council tax levels (and levels of increase) in their area compared to others. It may well be that authorities who have been more successful in communicating the need for council tax increases and the improvements to services are able to increase council tax without witnessing the decreases in satisfaction that others may witness if they have less successful communications and more hostile local papers, etc.

# image of councillors

We have no consistent hard evidence on the relationship between public perceptions of local councillors and views of authorities. There is plenty of information about how the public perceive councillors and their role. One key fact to consider is that despite being critical of councillors, the public has no great enthusiasm for replacing them with professional managers.

**Perceptions of leadership at local level**

Findings from the People's Panel demonstrate that residents tend to feel that local councillors have most influence over the way local public services are provided and more generally on the issues that affect people in the local area (table 7).

---

**Table 7: perceptions of who is in charge at local level**

*Looking at this list, which of these people, if any, do you think are in charge of public services in your local area?*

*And which of these people, if any, do you think are in charge of public servic   es in the United Kingdom, as a whole?*

*And which of these people has most influence on the issues that affect people in your local area?*

| | Public services - locally | Public services - nationally | Most influence |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Base: All respondents (1,086)* | % | % | % |
| Business people | 10 | 13 | 16 |
| Civil servants | 20 | 35 | 10 |
| National politicians | 10 | 65 | 14 |
| Local councillors | 66 | 13 | 65 |
| Local people | 6 | 2 | 11 |
| Senior managers in public services | 36 | 23 | 12 |
| Front line staff in public services (eg doctors, teachers, police, social workers, benefits officers) | 15 | 8 | 13 |
| Voluntary sector workers | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Other | * | 1 | * |
| None of these | * | * | * |
| Don't know | 6 | 5 | 6 |

## Public priorities for local councillors

Further findings from the People's Panel emphasise the importance the public place on honesty and trustworthiness in their local councillors (table 8).

### Table 8: preferred qualities in local councillors

*On this card are a list of personal qualities. Which three of these qualities, if any, do you feel are most important in local councillors?*

| *Base: All respondents  (1,086)* | % |
| --- | --- |
| Honest | 41 |
| Trustworthy | 32 |
| Accessible | 26 |
| Competent | 24 |
| Experienced in public life | 24 |
| Good communicator | 22 |
| Efficient | 20 |
| High moral standards | 15 |
| Caring | 14 |
| Integrity | 12 |
| Professional | 11 |
| Intelligent | 10 |
| Co-operative | 8 |
| Decisive | 6 |
| Involving | 5 |
| Experienced in running a  business | 4 |
| Innovative | 4 |
| Creative | 2 |
| Passionate | 2 |
| Tolerant | 2 |
| Cautious | 1 |
| Tough | 1 |
| Charismatic | * |
| Daring | * |
| Exciting | * |

## Levels of trust in local councillors

Nationally representative MORI research has shown that the public are less likely to trust local councillors than they are frontline staff, but more likely to do so than managers in local government (figure 12).

### Figure 12: lack of trust in managers and politicians - not professionals

*Q   Now I will read out a list of different people. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?*

| Category | % Trust |
|---|---|
| Doctors | 91% |
| Teachers | 87% |
| Professors | 74% |
| Judges | 72% |
| Clergymen | 71% |
| TV/newsreaders | 66% |
| Scientists | 65% |
| The police | 64% |
| Ordinary man/woman in street | 53% |
| Pollsters | 46% |
| Civil servants | 46% |
| **Local councillors** | 35% |
| Managers in the NHS | 35% |
| TU officials | 33% |
| **Managers in local government** | 29% |
| Business leaders | 28% |
| Government ministers | 20% |
| Journalists | 18% |
| Politicians generally | 18% |

Base: 2,141 /british adults aged 15+, Feb 2003

### Impact of perceptions on overall satisfaction

In terms of how views of councillors impact on overall satisfaction with authorities, figure 13 overleaf shows how residents in one county who are more aware of what their local councillor does are likely to be more satisfied overall than those who do not have any idea of what their local councillor does. This is consistent with people who are better informed being more positive generally.

However, the impact of perceptions of councillors on overall satisfaction does not appear to be as strong as other factors on average. While scandals do have an impact, even at the height of the Shirley Porter scandal at Westminster, just after her term of office, satisfaction with the council remained high.

**Figure 13: views of councillors and overall satisfaction**

*Q How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way . . . county council runs things?*

% Satisfied

| | |
|---|---|
| Overall | 51% |
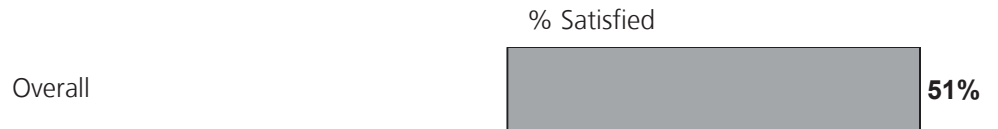
*What do you think your local councillor does?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Consult with the public and represent their views | 60% |
| Represent the council at a wider level, speaking up for . . . | 57% |
| Take decisions in the interests of . . . as a whole | 57% |
| Deal with the problems of people who live in their wards | 56% |
| Set the council's priorities | 56% |
| Review the council's performance | 56% |
| Implement central government policies, tailored to the local area | 56% |
| Take decisions in the interests their wards | 56% |
| Prepare for and attend committee meetings at county hall | 53% |
| Don't know/no opinion | 44% |

Base:    All respondents (1,116)

# the impact of external factors

MORI's recent *Frontiers of Performance in Local Government 2* report took forward work from 2002 which drew attention to the impact of exogenous factors such as deprivation and diversity levels, and their strong impact on perceptions of councils.

The two main features of the analysis - peer comparisons and taking account of local conditions - are clearly not new ideas. They are a feature of comparisons of performance in a wide range of public policy areas, notably education. However, these principles are much less widely applied in comparisons of council performance generally, and for perception-based measures in particular.

Our analysis shows that **deprivation levels** and **ethnic diversity** are important predictors of satisfaction that a local council has no control over.

The following two charts (figures 14 and 15) illustrate the relatively strong correlation between overall satisfaction and local levels of deprivation (as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation) - both in London using BVPI scores, and amongst the full range of authorities MORI has worked with since 2000.

**Figure 14: Overall Satisfaction versus Deprivation in London 2003-2004**

**% Satisfied with council**



$R^2 = 0.151$
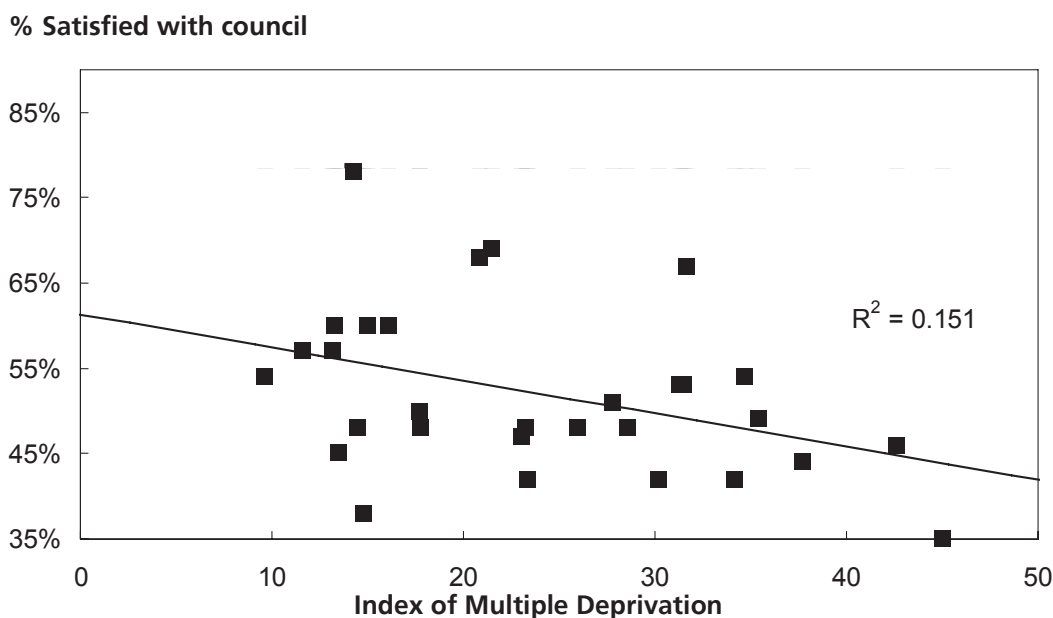
Base: London boroughs – ALG BVPI Surveys 2003-2004

This means that we need to reflect on how much movement is possible in terms of local government reputation - much is affected by issues outside its control.

**Figure 15: net satisfaction with council vs index of multiple deprivation score**

**±% Net satisfaction**
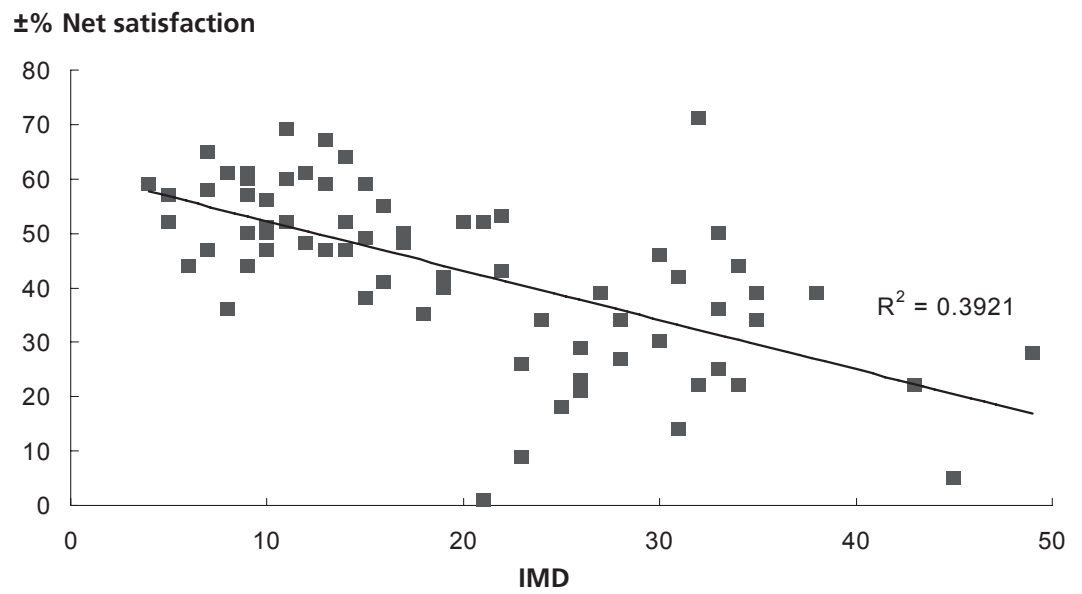
As well as levels of deprivation, MORI's *Frontiers of Performance* report highlighted relative levels of ethnic fractionalisation (ie the degree to which an area has different ethnic minorities within it, the 'mix' of people from different backgrounds) are also a relatively strong predictor of overall satisfaction. Those authorities which serve relatively more deprived populations or a greater mix of ethnic backgrounds generally score lower levels of satisfaction, reflecting the relative challenges they face. This is also the case in the NHS.

**Figure 16: net satisfaction with council vs ethnic fractionalisation**

**±% Net satisfaction**
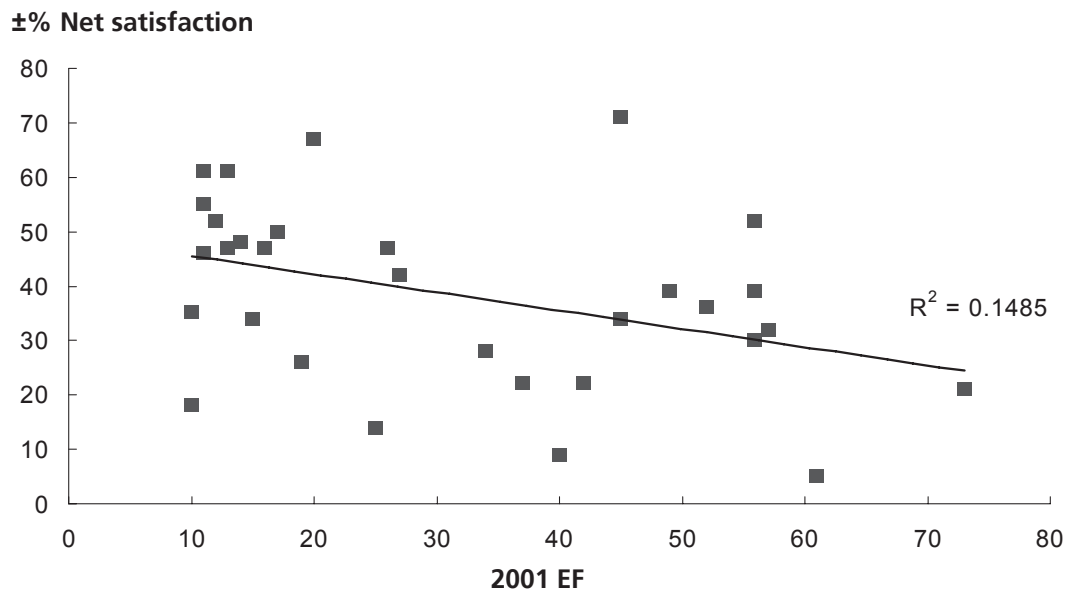
# national government's impact

The relative popularity of national government also has an impact on views of local government. Figure 17 below shows data from the MORI Omnibus in 2002 which shows that those who are satisfied with the way the government is running the country are significantly more likely to express satisfaction with their own local authority.

The impact is weaker than that of perceived value for money and quality of services, but does suggest it would be fruitful to explore these potential linkages in further detail. It may also be useful to explore the impact of voting intention and perceptions of party politics in general when gauging people's opinions of their local authority - in many cases it is unlikely to be important, but it may well have an impact on the opinions of others.

**Figure 17: satisfaction with local vs national government**

*Q   Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your local council is running the area?*

| | % Dissatisfied | % Satisfied |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 29% | 48% |
| Satisfied with the way the government is running country | 23% | 59% |
| Dissatisfied with the way the government is running country | 36% | 40% |
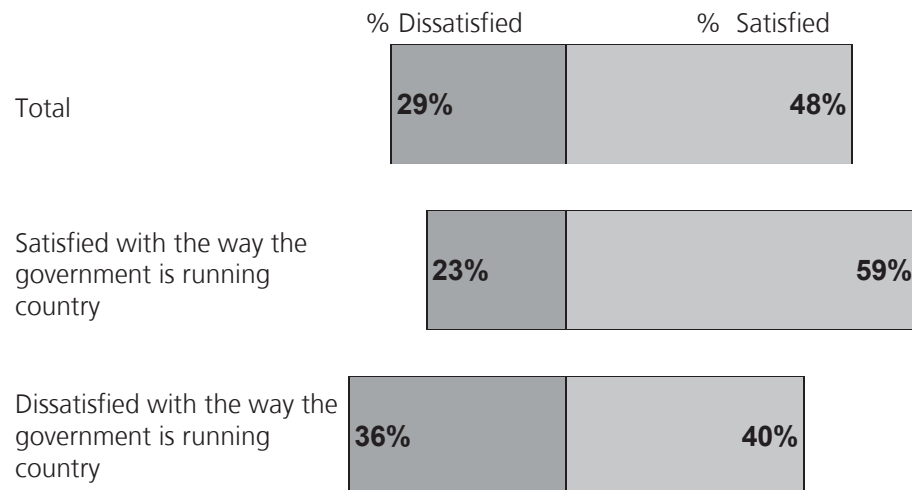
Base: 980 interviewed, 20-24 June 2002

# identifying overall key drivers

Since we have drawn on a range of data sources when testing hypotheses in previous chapters, it is not possible to directly compare the impact of different factors against one another. By conducting key drivers analysis on a single data source, we can identify the relative impact of some of these factors when others are kept constant. In this way we can gain an understanding of which factors are most likely to predict overall satisfaction.

Figure 18 below shows the results from such an analysis on the Best Value baseline survey dataset. In line with previous findings in this report from the MORI Norms Dataset, it appears that perceptions of the overall quality of services is the key driver of overall satisfaction, followed by perceptions of council efficiency and perceived value for money.

Perceived fairness, willingness to listen to residents and satisfaction with control of local development and street cleaning also emerge as key drivers.

**Figure 18: key drivers of satisfaction**



44% of satisfaction explained by model

Overall satisfaction with council

20% — Quality of council services good overall
11% — Council delivers services efficiently
10% — Council gives residents good value for money
8% — Council treats all types of people fairly
6% — Council takes residents' views into account a lot when making decisions
6% — Satisfaction with opportunities for participation in decision-making
5% — Service satisfaction: Control of development in local area
5% — Service satisfaction: Street cleaning

Base: All BV evaluation survey respondents

As well as running this analysis on all residents, we have also looked at key drivers of satisfaction among key sub-groups. These reveal few significant differences in the key drivers of opinion, suggesting that the drivers which emerge are fairly universal (figures 19 and 20)

**Figure 19: key drivers of satisfaction (16-34 year olds)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 44% of satisfaction explained by model | |

Overall satisfaction with council

28% — Quality of council services good overall
14% — Council delivers services efficiently
13% — Council treats all types of people fairly
10% — Council gives residents good value for money
8% — Council takes residents' views into account a lot when making decisions
8% — Success in dealing with crime and community safety
7% — Service satisfaction: Adult education
6% — In part-time work

Base: All BV evaluation survey respondents aged 16-34 (768)

**Figure 20: key drivers of satisfaction (65+ year olds)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 43% of satisfaction explained by model | |

Overall satisfaction with council

17% — Quality of council services good overall
12% — Council delivers services efficiently
12% — Satisfaction with opportunities for participation in decision-making
9% — Council gives residents good value for money
9% — Service satisfaction: Control of development in local area
-8% — Local level of deprivation
-7% — Council needs to make more effort to find out what people want
7% — Keeps residents well informed

Base: All BV evaluation survey respondents aged 65+ (505)

Notably, when looking at the drivers of satisfaction amongst parents with children at either primary or secondary school, satisfaction with local schools does not emerge as a key driver (figures 21 and 22).
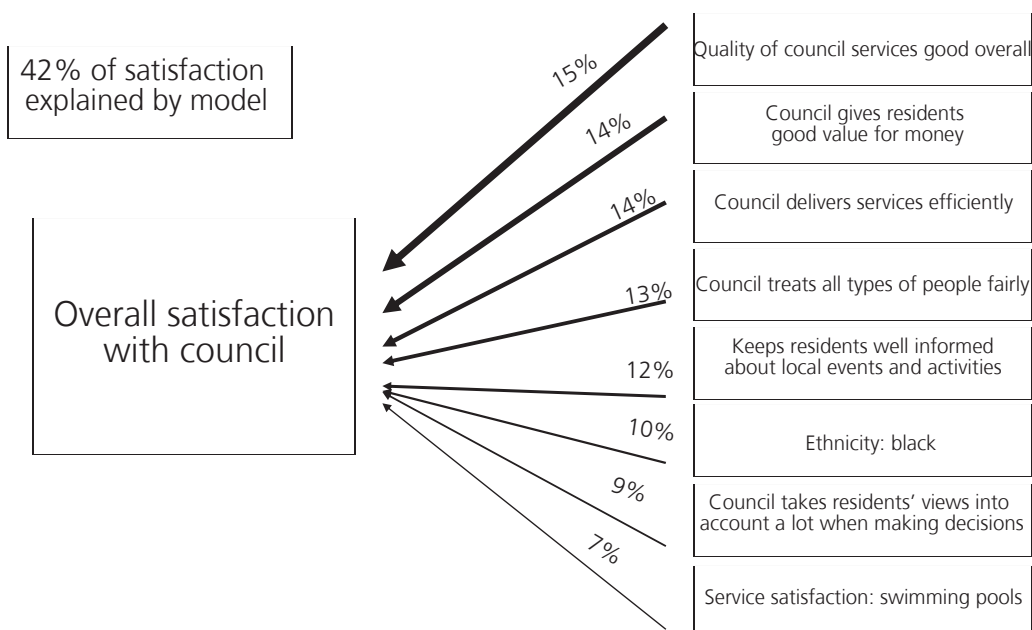
**Figure 21: key drivers of satisfaction (users of primary schools)**

| 45% of satisfaction explained by model | | |
|---|---|---|

Overall satisfaction with council

- 20% — Council delivers services efficiently
- 19% — Quality of council services good overall
- 18% — Council treats all types of people fairly
- 14% — Council gives residents good value for money
- 11% — Council takes residents' views into account a lot when making decisions
- 10% — Keeps residents informed about local events and activities
- 9% — Council plays an important role in improving quality of life in area

Base: All BV evaluation survey respondents who use primary schools (461)

**Figure 22: key drivers of satisfaction (users of secondary schools)**

42% of satisfaction explained by model

Overall satisfaction with council

- 15% — Quality of council services good overall
- 14% — Council gives residents good value for money
- 14% — Council delivers services efficiently
- 13% — Council treats all types of people fairly
- 12% — Keeps residents well informed about local events and activities
- 10% — Ethnicity: black
- 9% — Council takes residents' views into account a lot when making decisions
- 7% — Service satisfaction: swimming pools

Base: All BV evaluation survey respondents – users of secondary schools (340)

For further information, please contact
the Local Government Association at:
Local Government House
Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ

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