



# the reputation of local government

literature review to support the *my council* campaign



research study conducted for the Local Government Association  
September 2008

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# Introduction

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## Background and context

This report presents the findings of a literature review of research into public attitudes towards local government in England. This was conducted by the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Local Government Association (LGA) to support the launch of the 'My Council' campaign among English local authorities.

The purpose of the campaign is to raise public awareness of the services provided by local councils. This takes the form of posters and images which convey as directly as possible what the local council does and how this affects people's everyday lives, such as the poster below which communicates local council responsibility for allotments.



The initiative has been generated by the ongoing need to improve the public image of local government, a longstanding concern of the LGA. It follows on from the Reputation Campaign, launched by the LGA with the help of Ipsos MORI in 2005. Then, as now, the aim was to improve the reputation of local authorities through enhanced communications e.g. through the publication of a council newsletter and an A-Z directory of council services. There is evidence to suggest this has had a positive affect, but there remains work to be done and the 'My Council' represents the continuation of that effort.

## Objectives and Structure

The purpose of the literature review is to examine and summate all the available recent research on public attitudes towards local government. It sets out not just what residents know about their local council but how and why they have formed that view. If local authorities are to address the task of improving their reputation then it is important to understand what factors do most to make that reputation and what issues require most attention or appreciation.

It does this with the ultimate aim of making a business case for the 'My Council' campaign by showing the importance of residents' awareness and knowledge of their council in shaping their overall perception of it.

The report makes its case by looking at the following issues in turn:

- **The purpose of the 'My Council' initiative** – the recent history of local government communications, the Reputation Campaign and its impact;

- **Public awareness of their council** – public awareness of local government relative to other institutions, public awareness of specific local authorities, of council services and of councillors;
- **Public perceptions of their council** – trends in satisfaction with local councils, the factors most important in driving satisfaction, perceptions of value for money and the affect on satisfaction of demographic factors (e.g. ethnic diversity);
- **What media are important?** – how the extent and tone of coverage given to local government varies between media, public attitudes towards local councils' own publications and the importance of local government employees as advocates of councils; and
- **Why join the 'My Council' campaign?** – how the campaign makes the link between awareness of council services and overall perceptions of local government.

## Methodology

The literature review encompasses all the available recent research on public attitudes towards local government in England. A full list of all sources used and their provenance can be found in the bibliography.

# Executive Summary

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Public awareness and understanding of local government varies in several ways. Depending on the situation, the public may be highly conscious of their council and what it does, whereas in a different context knowledge of the council may be hazy. This is reflected in a number of findings. Local government is thought to have an important affect on people's lives; public awareness of local councils is above that of other political institutions and people consider local authorities to be more influential in everyday life than Westminster.

On the other hand, detailed knowledge of local councils is patchy, with disparate awareness of various types of councils and the services they run. District councils and highly visible environmental services (e.g. street cleaning) attract the most attention. Awareness of upper-tier councils is lower, as it is for the non-universal services they manage (e.g. education and social services). Similarly, councillors are considered to have an important role in local public services, but few people say they know much about what they do and fewer still have actually met a councillor.

The importance of this is shown by the strong relationship between how well informed people feel they are kept by their local council and their perception of its performance. People who feel well informed about what their council does are much more likely to think it provides high quality services and that it offers residents good value for money. These are the two most important factors that influence satisfaction with council performance.

This is not to say the task of improving local government's reputation is easy. People are influenced by many factors in forming their view of their council and some of these variables are outside councils' hands. Analysis of BVPI data for our Frontiers of Performance reports shows that satisfaction is lower in areas with high ethnic diversity, particularly in London Boroughs.<sup>1</sup> A similar pattern holds true for levels of deprivation, particularly for district councils. The more deprived a district is, the less likely its residents are to feel satisfied with their council. Local authorities have to work with the circumstances they find, and these can put them at a disadvantage. Local government also has to contend with the negative reception it frequently encounters in the media, particularly at a national level. If councils receive coverage in national newspapers, it is considerably more likely to be critical than positive.

Nonetheless, councils can make a major difference to their credibility locally. It is not random chance that authorities with the highest CPA scores also have the highest proportions of residents who feel informed about them and have staff who are the most likely to say they would speak positively about them. The 'My Council' campaign can also draw on the fact that council publications are the source of information people are most likely to say they use to find out about their local authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI Frontiers of Performance in Local Government Reports; 2003/4 and 2006/7

# The 'My Council' Campaign

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## Local Government Communications

Jim Hacker: *"Half of them [local councillors] are self-centred busy-bodies on an ego-trip, and the other half are in it for what they can get out of it."*

Sir Humphrey Appleby: *"Perhaps they ought to be in the House of Commons....[nervous hesitation], I mean, to see how a proper legislative assembly behaves."*

Yes Minister, BBC TV, 1982

The task of improving local government's reputation has generated much debate in recent years, as the drive to engage with residents as 'consumers' of local services<sup>2</sup> comes up against the sometimes poor rating of the local government 'brand'. However, this is not a new problem. As the above quotation suggests, local authorities have often had a bad press, historically speaking. This gives some perspective to the challenge of turning their reputation around.

Many of the concerns about local government's image are indeed recurrent. Research for the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) in 1999 showed only a third of people in England (33%) believed they got good value for money from their council tax. Similarly, whereas a majority (58%) felt informed about what their district council did, only a quarter (26%) thought the same about their county council.<sup>3</sup> Almost a decade on, low public perception of value for money and low awareness of local services (particularly at county level) remain prominent issues for many councils.

One manifestation of local government's sometimes weak image is the 'perception gap' which shows the public is more positive about the services run by their council than about the council itself. In the 2003/4 BVPIs, only 15 councils had an overall satisfaction score higher than the average score for their services. In the 2006/7 BVPIs, only three authorities achieved this.<sup>4</sup>

Partly this may reflect the failure of local authorities to communicate effectively with the residents they serve. Ipsos MORI research in 2005 showed that only 5% of people say they know a great deal about what the council does.<sup>5</sup> This formed the backdrop for the Reputation Campaign that the Local Government Association (LGA) launched with the help of Ipsos MORI that year, to encourage local authorities to invest in their communications.

Drawing on the 2003/4 BVPI data, Ipsos MORI stressed the link between how informed people feel about their local council and how satisfied they are with its performance and value for money. It used this to advocate the following measures:

- All councils should publish an A-Z guide to services, setting out as clearly as possible what they do.
- They should all publish a council magazine/newsletter.
- Branding council services so that activities are recognised in the local area,

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<sup>2</sup> Unlocking the Talent of our Communities; CLG (2008), p.10

<sup>3</sup> National Centre for Social Research/DETR; 2,074 adults aged 18+ were interviewed face to face in England during March and April 1999

<sup>4</sup> Frontiers of Performance IV, Ipsos MORI (2007)

<sup>5</sup> The Business Case for the Reputation Project; LGA/Ipsos MORI (2006), p.11

- Effective internal communications to make local government employees (4% of the British population) better advocates of councils and,
- More effective media management to improve the coverage that councils receive in the press.<sup>6</sup>

However, much still remains to be done. LG Communications, an association of councils that works to raise the standard of local government communications, conducted research among local authorities in early 2008. This found that many chief executives regard communications teams as only 'channel managers' who have little if any strategic role; they tell people what the council does but they have little say in how it does it. Progress is also held back by the lack of evidence on the impact of council communications, which makes it difficult for communications teams to argue for more resources, recognition and influence.<sup>7</sup>

By no means are all the outcomes negative. The LGA Reputation Campaign does seem to have made a difference. Almost all the 50 chief executives (86%) that took part in the LG Communications survey had heard of the LGA campaign and for some, it has made a significant affect on their council.<sup>8</sup>

*"[The campaign is] very good. Has helped us focus on relations between communications and reputation and satisfaction and provided access to advice."*

Chief Executive, Unitary Authority

*"[It] got it in our heads and doing a lot of what is required."*

Chief Executive, London Borough

Nonetheless, this does not apply to every council. When chief executives were asked specifically what they were doing to build their council's corporate reputation, only a fifth mentioned the LGA Campaign spontaneously.<sup>9</sup> It is the need to emphasise the worth of effective communications which is behind the 'My Council' Campaign.

## The 'My Council' Campaign

The 'My Council' campaign was launched in late 2007 to raise public awareness of what services councils provide. Ipsos MORI's analysis shows that perceived **'value for money' is one of the principal factors affecting public satisfaction with local authorities**. This encapsulates the importance of good communications, for how can people decide if their council offers them value for money if they don't know what it does?

As noted, the Reputation Campaign has had some affect. Indeed, at the time of writing, 272 local authorities have joined the campaign and agreed to implement its recommendations.<sup>10</sup> Considerable effort has been put into raising the status of communications in the work of local authorities. For its part, the LGA has set up Commsnet, a service to help disseminate communications advice among councils and to develop media strategies to promote their activities. Nonetheless, it is important not to be sanguine. The fact that a council has joined the Reputation Campaign does not necessarily mean communications are given more priority, something shown by the LG Communications research.

The importance of service awareness and the need to reinforce the message of the Reputation Campaign has given rise to the 'My Council' initiative. The campaign takes the form of posters and images that show as simply

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.19

<sup>7</sup> Chief Executives Challenge Report, LGcommunications (2008), pp.8-9

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.52

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.24

<sup>10</sup> <http://reputation.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=17511>

as possible what things local councils do that affect people's lives, an initiative begun by Northamptonshire County Council. As noted by Sir Simon Milton, former Chairman of the LGA, the goal is nothing less *"than a first for the sector, to launch a national brand for local government"*.<sup>11</sup> An example of one of the posters is shown below, which concisely conveys the message that Northamptonshire County Council is responsible for local leisure centres.



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<sup>11</sup> Sir Simon Milton's speech to the 2008 LGcommunications conference;  
[http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/documents/Sir\\_Milton\\_Speech.doc](http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/documents/Sir_Milton_Speech.doc)



# Public Awareness of their Council

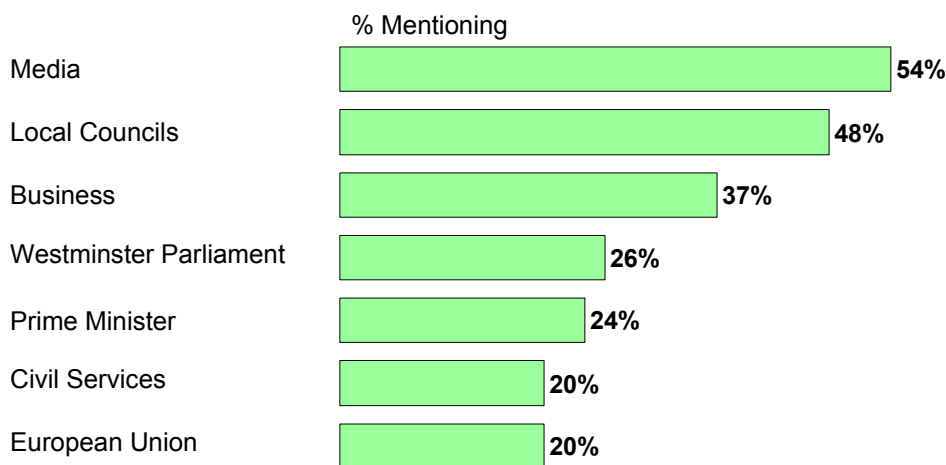
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## Significance of local government

There is recognition of the importance of local government, with councils widely seen to have a significant affect on everyday life. The fourth wave of the Hansard Political Engagement Audit in 2006 showed almost half of the UK public (48%) thought local councils had a major affect on day-to-day life, compared to only a quarter that mentioned Parliament (26%) or the Prime Minister (24%). Only the media (54%) was cited more often as a source of influence.<sup>12</sup>

### Impact on Everyday Life

Q From this list, which two or three of the following do you believe have most impact on people's everyday lives?



Base: 1,490 members of the UK public aged 18+, interviewed 23-28 November 2006

Source: Ipsos MORI

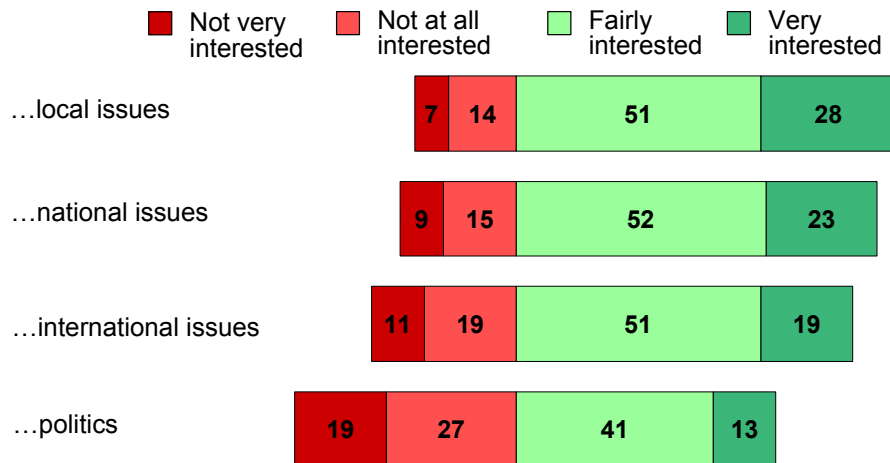
Public attitudes towards local government are a probable reflection of the level of interest in local affairs and the Engagement Audit actually found this to be higher than for national and international matters. Over a quarter of the UK public (28%) said they were *very* interested in local issues, in comparison with less than a quarter for national issues (23%) and a fifth (19%) for international matters.

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<sup>12</sup> Political Engagement Audit Wave 4: Hansard Society/Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute. A total of 1,490 members of the UK public aged 18+ were interviewed by telephone between 23 and 28 November 2006.

## Levels of public interest

Q How interested would you say are in....



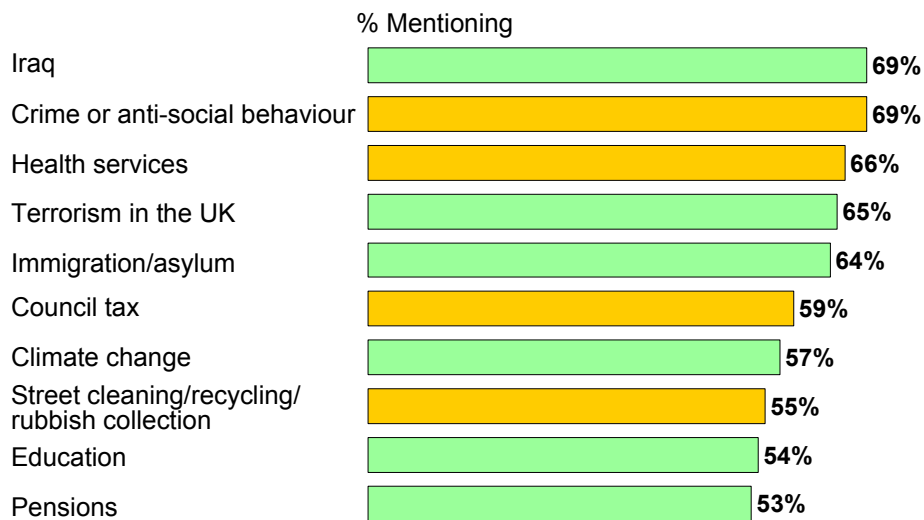
Base: 1,490 members of the UK public aged 18+, interviewed 23-28 November 2006

Source: Ipsos MORI

Similarly, local issues figure prominently as subjects of discussion with friends and family. The Engagement Audit found over half the population had discussed council tax (59%) or street cleaning/rubbish collection (55%) at some point in the previous year. Furthermore, seven in ten (69%) had talked about crime and anti-social behaviour and two in three (66%) had discussed the quality of health services, issues that are both likely to be influenced by local experiences.

## Subjects of Discussion

Q Which of these local, national and international issues, if any, have you discussed with your family or friends in the last year or so?



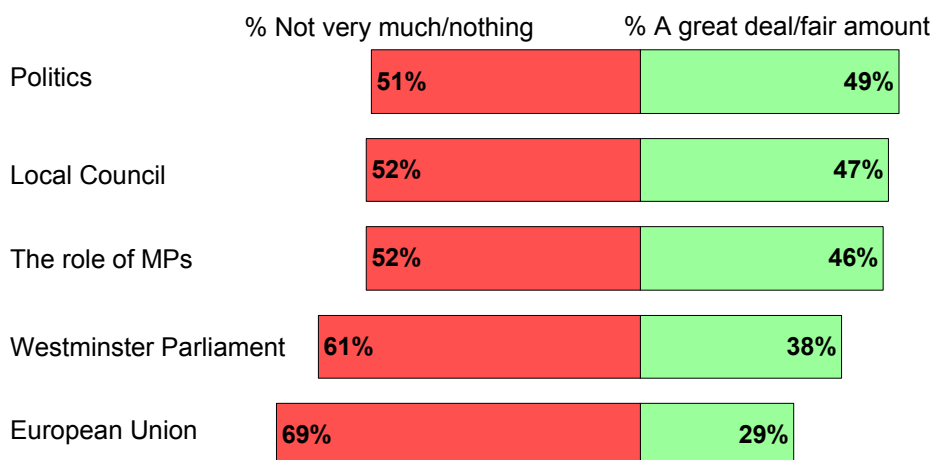
Base: 1,490 members of the UK public aged 18+; interviewed 23-28 November 2006

Source: Ipsos MORI

The public's knowledge of local government is also comparable with its understanding of national and European institutions. As shown in the following chart, almost half of people in the UK (47%) say they know at least a fair amount about their local council, the same proportion as know a fair amount about the role of MPs (46%). In comparison, less than two in five (38%) say know at least a fair amount about Parliament and only three in ten (29%) say they know that much about the European Union.

## Knowledge of Political Institutions

Q How much, if anything, do you feel you know about...?



Base: 1,490 members of the UK public aged 18+, interviewed 23-28 November 2006

Source: Ipsos MORI

The importance the public give to local councils, as shown in the Engagement Audits, has led Declan McHugh of the Hansard Society to observe that *"politics is much wider than Westminster alone, and on the evidence of this research there is some truth in the assertion that all politics is local"*.<sup>13</sup>

### Overall knowledge of local authorities

The public may place importance on local issues and the local councils that deal with them. However, this does not necessarily translate into detailed knowledge of local government. Ipsos MORI research from June 2008 finds that only 29% of people in England can name the leader of their local council.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in London, only 42% of people can correctly identify the party in control of their borough council and only 6% can correctly name their council's leader.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, this must be seen in a wider context of low public knowledge of political institutions; in 2006, less than half of people in the UK were able to name their MP.<sup>16</sup>

The patchiness of public knowledge is further shown by the differing levels of awareness of the various types of councils. As noted, the DETR research in 1999 found the public to be more familiar with district authorities than county councils. This was strongly confirmed in 2004 by research conducted by Ipsos MORI in six northern counties (Cheshire, Cumbria, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland and North Yorkshire). Among almost 14,000 people interviewed, four in five (79%) correctly named their district council as one of the authorities providing local services, more than twice the proportion that could name their county council (37%).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.politicsjournal.org/journals/pdf/5/2004/mchugh.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ipsos MORI/Local Government Network; 1,004 adults aged 18+ were interviewed across Great Britain between 15 and 18 May 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos MORI/London Councils; 1,001 adults in London aged 18+ were interviewed by telephone between 11 and 18 April 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Political Engagement Audit Wave 4

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos MORI/Boundary Commission; 13,676 adults aged 18+ were interviewed face-to-face in Cheshire, Cumbria, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland and North Yorkshire between 1 December 2003 and 23 February 2004.

<b>Q Do you know the name of the council or councils which provide local government services in this neighbourhood?</b>	
<b>Q How much would you say you know about local councils and the services they provide?</b>	
<i>Base: All people interviewed (13,676)</i>	%
<b>Correctly identify District Council</b>	
Yes	79
No	21
<b>Correctly identify County Council</b>	
Yes	37
No	63
<b>Knowledge of local councils and their</b>	
A great deal/a fair amount	41
Not very much/nothing at all	58
<i>Source: Ipsos MORI</i>	

If people are not always able to name their local council, it is not surprising that most people do not know much about what local councils actually do. Across the six counties surveyed in 2004, only two in five people (41%) said they knew a great or a fair amount about local councils and the services they provide. When the same question was asked in London in April 2008, a similar proportion (44%) said they know at least a fair amount about their borough council.

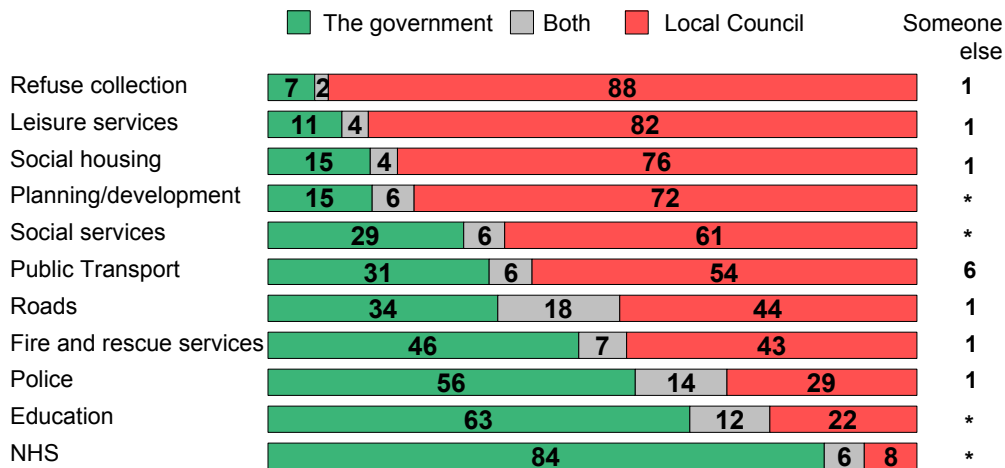
## Awareness of Services: Central vs. Local Government

There is varying overall awareness of local councils. As such, there is varying awareness of what councils do, reflected in the public's confusion about who provides local services. Local authorities are strongly identified with some of the services they provide but not with others. This creates a **reputation deficit** – councils might not get credit for some things they do, but they might be blamed for problems elsewhere that they are not responsible for.

Environmental services such as waste collection are the most widely recognised council activities. Research conducted by BMG in 2005 showed almost nine in ten people (88%) in England identified their local council with refuse collection. The great majority of people also associated local councils with leisure services (82%), social housing (76%) and planning and development controls (72%).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In support of the Lyons Inquiry into the future of local government, BMG interviewed 1,058 adults aged 16+ across England between 27 May and 1 July 2005. Interviews were conducted face-to-face.

## Responsibility for local services



Base: 1,058 adults aged 16+ in England interviewed between 27 May and 1 July 2005

Source: Lyons Inquiry

Fewer people thought local councils are accountable for social services (61%) and only a fifth (22%) thought they are the main providers of education. This might be cause for concern because social services and education are by far the two largest sources of local government expenditure. On the other hand, a large number of people believe councils are responsible for services over which they have less direct control. Three in ten (29%) think local councils are mainly responsible for policing and two in five (43%) say the same about fire and rescue.

Similarly, a London-wide survey in April 2008 found that whereas rubbish collection and recycling were almost universally recognised as council services (97%), almost half of people also thought their borough council was responsible for the police (49%) and the local hospital (45%).<sup>19</sup> The significance of this lies in the public's priorities for their neighbourhood. The level of crime is their top priority for improving their area (63% indicated this is in the 2006/7 BVPIs). The fact that many also think the council is responsible for policing shows how confusion about responsibility for services can affect a council's reputation, with the council unfairly taking the blame because of dissatisfaction with the local police. This will become more significant as the Comprehensive Area Assessment makes perceptions of the local area a crucial gauge of council performance.

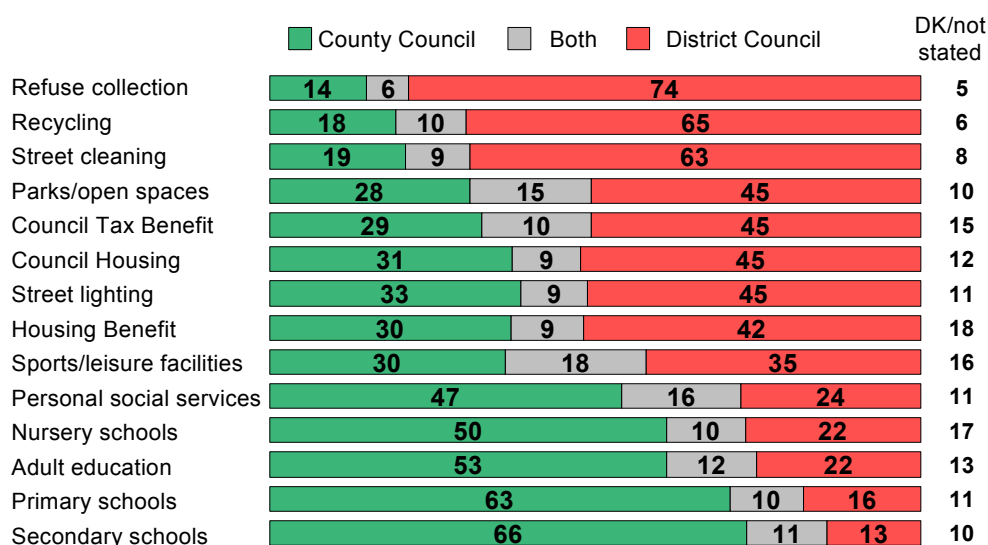
## Awareness of services: District vs. County Councils

There is not only confusion about whether a service is run by 'the council' or 'the government'. In two-tier authority areas, there is further uncertainty about the layer of local government responsible. Once again, people have the highest awareness when it comes to environmental services. Ipsos MORI research in 2007 shows most residents know their district council is accountable for refuse collection (74%), recycling (65%) and street cleaning (63%). Most also recognise the county council's responsibility for primary and secondary schools (63% and 66% respectively).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ipsos MORI/London Councils, April 2008

<sup>20</sup> Ipsos MORI/LGA: 1,119 adults aged 18+ were interviewed in England between 8 January and 12 February 2007. Of these, 566 lived in areas with a two-tier authority structure.

## District vs. County Services



Base: 566 residents in two-tier authorities in England; interviewed 8 Jan – 12 Feb 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

On the other hand, people are uncertain on other services which are not universally used. Almost half (45%) know that council housing is provided by their district council but a substantial proportion (31%) thought the county council was accountable for it. Similarly, only a third (35%) know their district council runs local leisure centres and sports facilities; an almost equal proportion think that is done by the county council (30%).

This has major implications for councils' reputation. The services most often linked with 'the council' are run by district authorities – waste collection, recycling and street cleaning. This gives district councils a publicity advantage over their county partners. It raises their profile and the more informed people feel, the more satisfied they tend to be.

Non-universal services such as education and social services have a lower profile and so do county councils, which are largely responsible for them. Even when most people are unaware of a district council service (e.g. council housing), this has less affect on its profile simply because most people don't live in council accommodation. The net affect is shown by the 2004 research in Northern England – which indicates much greater awareness of district than county authorities.

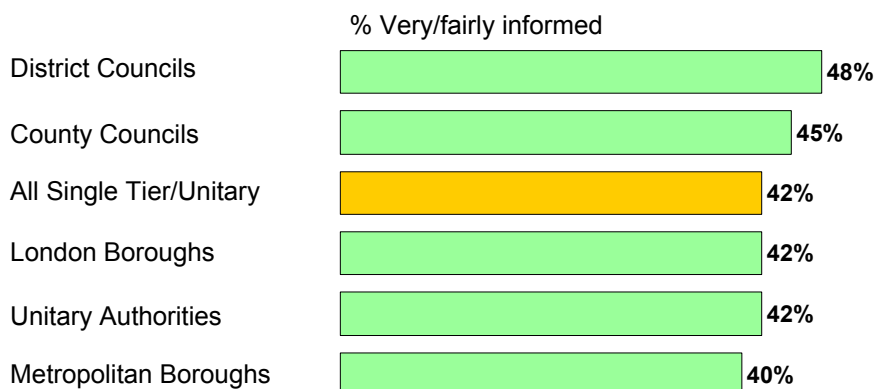
## Being kept informed about one's Council

The 2006/07 round of BVPIs is important in showing not only the low level of knowledge about local councils but also how this varies by council type.<sup>21</sup> Across England, the overall proportion of people who feel informed about their council fell from 51% in 2003/04 to 42% in 2006/07. Although we can not be certain that this is a real finding, due to changes in questionnaire design by CLG, the level certainly has not improved since 2003/4. Consistent with other finding, people are most likely to say they feel informed about services and benefits offered by their district council (48%). This places it above county councils (45%). When county councils are included with all the other single-tier and unitary authorities, the proportion that feel informed falls to 42%.

<sup>21</sup> Based on BVPI data for 387 local authorities supplied by the Audit Commission

## Feeling informed about Council Services

Q Overall, how well informed do you think your Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?



Base: BVPI 2006/07 data for 387 local authorities in England

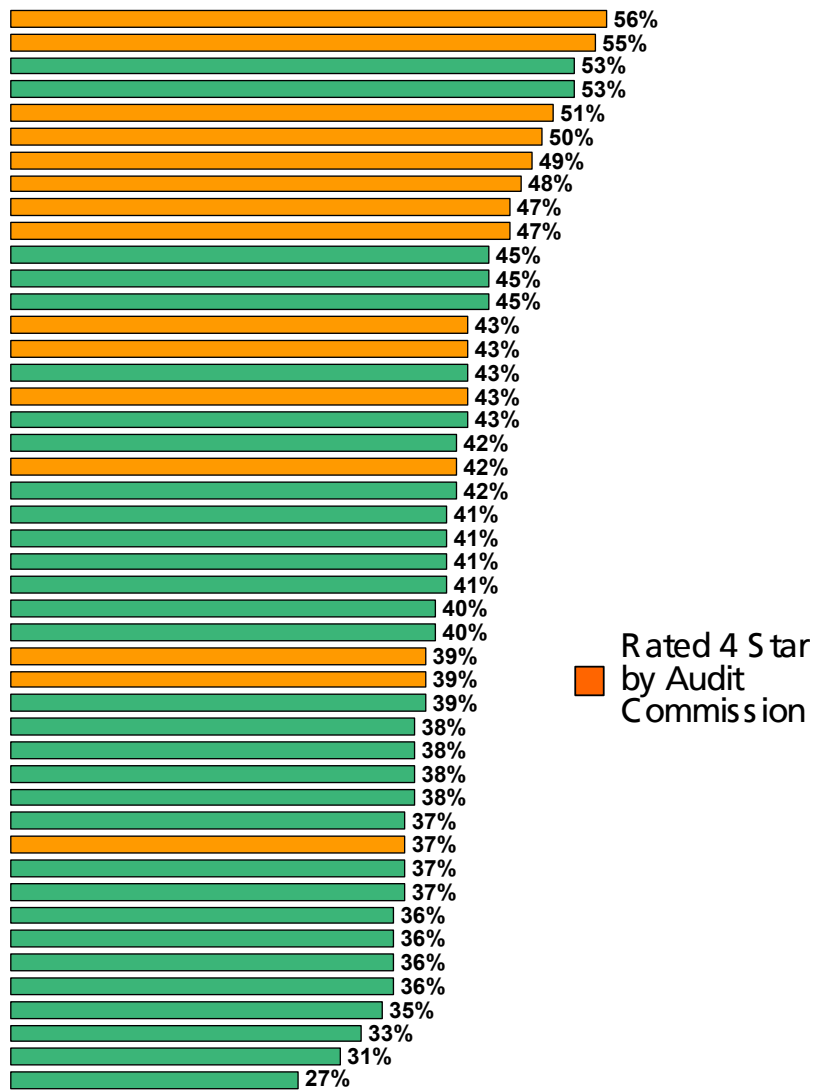
Source: Ipsos MORI

However, it is notable that councils which communicate most effectively with residents tend to be the most successful. As shown in the chart below, when unitary authorities are ranked by the percentage of residents that feel informed, eight of the top 10 received a 'four star' rating from the Audit Commission in 2007. All were considered to be improving either 'well' or 'strongly'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

# Unitary Authorities vs. Feeling informed



Base: All 46 Unitary Authorities in England, 2006/07 BVPIs

Source: Ipsos MORI

## Awareness of Councillors

The image of council members is partly a reflection of the wider public image of local government, although more accentuated. Most people do not feel they know much about their role and are unable to say how competently they do their job. As shown in the chart below, only a fifth of people in England (19%) say they know at least a fair amount about what their local councillors do, compared with over half who say they don't know very much and a quarter (26%) who say they know nothing at all about them.

This is mirrored by the fact that almost two-thirds (65%) of people in England say they have never met any of their local councillors.<sup>23</sup> In 2002, a similar proportion (61%) said they did not know the name their local councillor.<sup>24</sup>

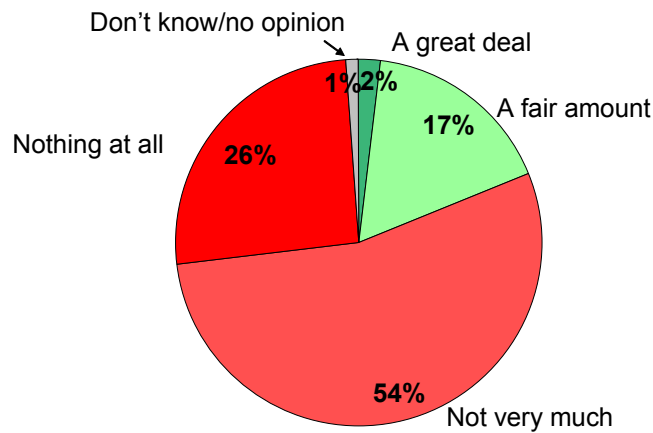
<sup>23</sup> Ipsos MORI/Standard Board for England; 1,027 people aged 16+ were interviewed face-to-face across England between 31 May and 18 July 2005

<sup>24</sup> Ipsos MORI/Green Issues Communications; 1,067 people aged 15+ were interviewed face-to-face across Great Britain between 18 and 22 April 2002



## Awareness of Councillors

Q How much, if anything, would you say you know about the work of your local councillors?



Base: 1,027 adults in England aged 16+, interviewed between 31 May and 18 July 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

Nonetheless, this must be seen in a wider context. Most people do not get in touch with public officials, elected or otherwise. The 2007 wave of the Citizenship Survey found that people in England were just as likely to have been in touch with a councillor in the last year (10%) as with an official employed by a council (11%). In contrast, only one in twenty people (6%) had contacted their MP in the previous 12 months.

Furthermore, knowledge of councillors is considerably greater among people who have had contact with them. Almost half (48%) of those who have met a councillor in the previous six months say they know at least a fair amount about what they do, compared with only a tenth (10%) of those who say they have never met a councillor.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, people in London are twice as likely to name their council leader correctly if they have taken part in some form of voluntary work in their community in the previous 12 months (10% compared with 5% of those who had not been involved in such work).

In addition, although most people know little detail about local councillors, they do consider them to be influential in their local area. In 2000, two-thirds (66%) of participants in the People's Panel thought councillors were in charge of public services in their local area.<sup>26</sup> Only a third of panellists (36%) mentioned senior managers in those public services and only a tenth (10%) thought national politicians were in charge. Similarly, two thirds of panellists (65%) considered councillors to have the most influence on issues affecting their local area. The next most influential group was business people, mentioned by only 16%.

<sup>25</sup> Ipsos MORI/Standard Board for England, 2005

<sup>26</sup> The People's Panel was conducted by Ipsos MORI and the Cabinet Office between 1998 and 2002. This data is from Wave 5 which involved interviews with 1,086 panel members between 18 March and 9 April 2000

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### Perceptions of who is in charge at local level

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*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 services 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?*

	<b>Public services - locally</b>	<b>Public services – nationally</b>	<b>Most influence</b>
<i>Base: All respondents (1,086)</i>	%	%	%
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 (e.g. doctors, teachers, police, social workers,)	15	8	13
Voluntary sector workers	3	1	2
Other	*	1	*
None of these	*	*	*
Don't know	6	5	6

*Source: Ipsos MORI*

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# Public perceptions of their council

## Overall satisfaction with local councils – ups and downs

The last decade has painted a mixed picture of satisfaction with local government. The years after 2000 saw a significant drop in the number of people satisfied with the way their local council runs things, from almost two thirds (65%) in 2000 to just over half (55%) in 2003, according to the CLG National Report. Similarly, though starting from a lower initial satisfaction rating, the People's Panel surveys found that the proportion of people satisfied with local government declined from 53% in 1998 to 50% in 2000 and 47% in 2002<sup>27</sup>.

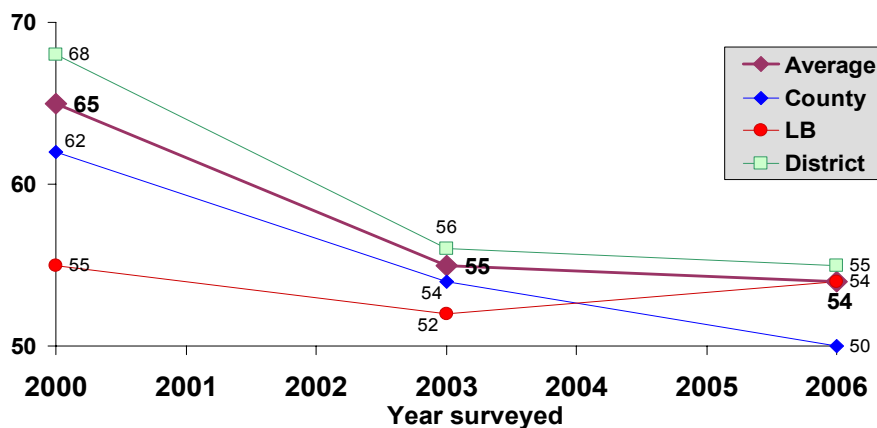
However, since 2003 the BVPIs have traced a general slowing in the decline of satisfaction, as shown in the following chart. Moreover, Ipsos MORI's analysis of the same data in its latest Frontiers of Performance report indicates the gap has narrowed between actual and expected satisfaction levels. These expected levels are based on a variety of demographic and economic variables known to affect satisfaction and on the performance of peer authorities with similar profiles. In addition, some areas have seen impressive rises in overall levels of satisfaction, notably inner London boroughs, which have traditionally struggled in this area.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, telephone research conducted by Ipsos MORI in October 2007 found that the proportion of people satisfied with their local authority was as high as **65%**<sup>29</sup>. Again, this suggests that recent years may have seen a more positive outlook in terms of overall public satisfaction with local government.

### Tracking BVPI Satisfaction Data over Time

Q How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your local council runs things?

Satisfied (BV3)



Base: BVPI 2006 (387 local authorities)

Source: Ipsos MORI

Nonetheless, it is clear that there is still room for improvement, an impression reinforced by qualitative research on the subject. For example, during the development of the Reputation Project in 2005, Ipsos MORI found that when people were asked for their 'top of mind' associations with local government, negative responses clearly outweighed positive ones. People spontaneously mentioned phrases such as 'high council tax', 'unreliable', 'wasteful', 'faceless' and 'ineffective' when asked for their immediate associations with local government.

<sup>27</sup> Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda: Progress Report on Service Improvement in Local Government; ODPM (2005)

<sup>28</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV; Ipsos MORI (2007)

<sup>29</sup> Ipsos MORI Local Government District Tracker (2007)

*"They don't do anything that I've ever seen"*

Female, Gateshead

Equally, when asked to describe their own authority as an animal, creatures such as an ostrich and a sloth were mentioned, to symbolise perceived traits such as burying its head in the sand or moving slowly<sup>30</sup>.

*"I thought of a sloth. It's just that they go about things very slowly."*

Male, Harrow

Similarly, qualitative research conducted for CLG in 2006 found that residents' first reactions when asked to discuss their local council or authority were largely negative. It was rare for those taking part in the focus groups and workshops to be satisfied with their local authority, and aspects of local services thought to be sub-standard received significantly more attention than those where the council was thought to perform adequately<sup>31</sup>.

## Environmental services, culture and leisure: increased satisfaction with universal services

Results from the 2006 BVPI surveys indicate that there have been general rises in satisfaction with some of the basic services provided by local government since the previous BVPI round in 2003/4. For instance, satisfaction with the cleanliness of the local area rose eight percentage points to 68%, while satisfaction with recycling facilities and local tips rose from 68% to 70% and from 75% to 79% respectively. Likewise, satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities increased four points to 58%, and satisfaction with libraries was up six points to 73%.<sup>32</sup>

## But this does not always result in higher overall satisfaction

These levels of satisfaction highlight a common theme in both quantitative and qualitative research on local government: the disparity between the perception of specific local services and overall satisfaction with local authorities, with the former usually significantly above the latter. Research conducted in 2005 by Ipsos MORI to support the Reputation Campaign found that, while the most recent BVPI data (2003/4) pointed to an overall satisfaction level with councils of just **55%**, overall satisfaction with some of the core services provided by local authorities was around **70-80%**<sup>33</sup>.

Likewise, more recent analysis of the 2006/7 BVPI data still points to a considerable difference between residents' views of local services and of their council. Indeed, in only three local authorities were people more likely to be satisfied with their council overall than with the services it provides. This gap in perception is particularly evident in metropolitan and unitary boroughs, whereas London boroughs (and to a lesser extent district councils) tend to have the smallest disparity in satisfaction between services and overall council performance. Indeed, some London boroughs notably improved their levels of overall satisfaction<sup>34</sup>.

Similarly, it is interesting to note that residents who use council services tend to be significantly more satisfied than non-users. Again, this also helps explain why ensuring the provision of high quality individual council services, although evidently important, is not necessarily enough to ensure high levels of overall satisfaction among its residents.

This all suggests that the continuing challenge facing local authorities may be as much about the successful communication of their achievements and responsibilities as it is about improving performance. Indeed, this was

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<sup>30</sup> Understanding the Reputation of Local Government: Key Drivers and the Potential National v. Local Perception Gap; MORI/LGA (2005)

<sup>31</sup> Perceptions of Local Government in England: Key Findings from Qualitative Research; BMG/CLG (2006)

<sup>32</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV: Place Shapers or Shaped by Place; Ipsos MORI (2007)

<sup>33</sup> What Drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government; MORI/LGA (2005)

<sup>34</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV: Ipsos MORI (2007)

a key issue which the Reputation Project sought to address, and upon which the My Council campaign is designed to build.

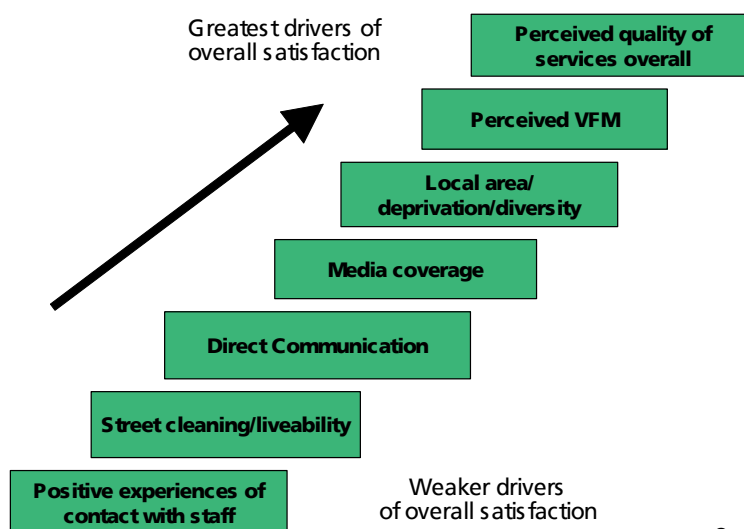
## Satisfaction is about more than services

As this suggests, the drivers of overall satisfaction with local authorities are more complex than just being the product of satisfaction with individual local services. Therefore, analysis of BVPI data to show the correlation between a range of variables and overall satisfaction allows us to highlight the range of factors which appear to be 'drivers' of attitudes to councils' performance.

When conducted by Ipsos MORI for the LGA in 2005, this identified the perceived quality of services overall and perceived value for money as the two foremost drivers of overall satisfaction. Exogenous factors relating to the 'nature of place' were also highlighted as important (particularly levels of deprivation and ethnic diversity), followed by media coverage and communications.

Interestingly, it was only after these issues that **individual** universal services became a key consideration, which helps explain some of the disparity between service satisfaction levels and overall views of council performance. Among these services, it was those affecting street scene and so-called 'liveability' which were found to have the most impact. Positive experiences of contacting an authority were seen to have a lesser role, largely because those who have never contacted their council are generally more satisfied with it than those who have<sup>35</sup>. These drivers are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### Most important drivers of reputation among local residents

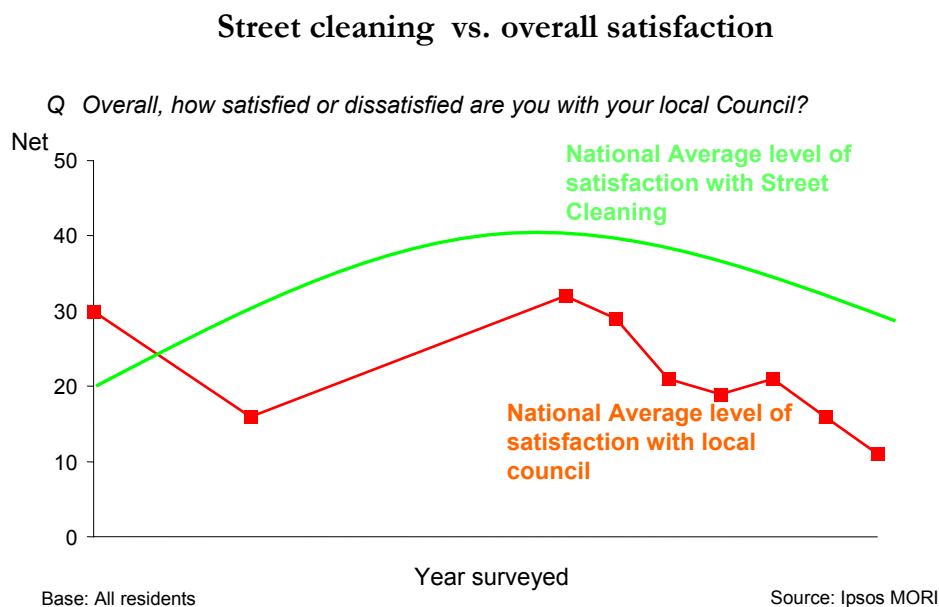


Source: Ipsos MORI

<sup>35</sup> The Business Case for the Reputation Project; MORI/LGA (2005)

## The importance of 'Cleaner, greener, safer' services

The affect of individual services on overall views of a council tends to be greatest for 'cleaner, greener, safer' services, i.e. those which affect the visual appearance and atmosphere of an area. Satisfaction with street cleaning appears to be particularly tied to overall satisfaction with the council that provides it. This is highlighted in the graph below, which uses evidence from different authorities to show how increases or decreases in the ratings of this key service appears to have had a significant impact on overall satisfaction over time<sup>36</sup>.



Similarly, a survey conducted for the Standards Board for England in 2005 again found that discontentment with road sweeping or street cleaning topped the list of reasons given for dissatisfaction with the Council. Moreover, issues around 'liveability' appear to be the most visible 'drivers' of satisfaction from these findings<sup>37</sup>.

Reasons for dissatisfaction with the Council	Total
<i>Base: All respondents dissatisfied with the council</i>	(237)
	%
Poor road sweeping/street cleaning/too much litter	17
Poor refuse collection service	11
Poor maintenance of roads/pavements	11
No service for what you pay in council tax/nothing ever gets done	10
Parking problems/lack of residents parking/disabled parking	9
Poor maintenance of trees/greenery	9
Poor/slow repairs service	7
Lack of consultation/they don't listen to what people want	7
Traffic problems/poor traffic schemes	6

<sup>36</sup> What Drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government; MORI/LGA (2005)

<sup>37</sup> Report for the Standards Board for England on the Public Perceptions of Ethics; Ipsos MORI (2005)

They waste money	5
They make bad choices/spend money on the wrong things	4
Lack of facilities for children/youths nowhere for them to play/congregate	4
Poor town planning	4
Problems with drug taking/dealing	4
They (councillors) don't do what they promise/are elected to do	4
High council tax/increased council tax	4
Councillor behaviour	3

*NB: answers below 4% (apart from councillor behaviour) are not shown*      *Source: Ipsos MORI*

Key Drivers analysis also suggests that issues around planning and local development have an important bearing on satisfaction levels. Considering that many people will not use these specific services, this might reflect wider concerns about development issues in local areas. Satisfaction with recycling, on the other hand, tends to be a less reliable predictor of overall satisfaction with a local authority, as indicated by the table below.

Finally, views of local secondary schools also appear a fairly reliable predictor of overall satisfaction with a council among those who use them, whereas primary schools and leisure services are only weakly correlated with it. However, because most residents don't use any of these services, their overall impact on satisfaction is rather limited, particularly as those who don't use council services tend to be less satisfied with their council than those who do<sup>38</sup>.

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#### **Correlation between overall satisfaction and satisfaction with individual services<sup>39</sup>**

	<b><i>Correlation with overall net satisfaction with Council (MORI norms – across councils)</i></b>	<b><i>BV evaluation (single survey)</i></b>
<b>Satisfaction with Control of development in the local area</b>	-	0.37
<b>Satisfaction with handling of planning applications</b>	-	0.33
<b>Satisfaction with Street Cleaning</b>	0.29	0.30
<b>Satisfaction with Recycling</b>	0.09	0.19
<b>Satisfaction with Refuse Collection</b>	0.02	0.18

*Source: Ipsos MORI*

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<sup>38</sup> What Drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government; MORI/LGA (2005)

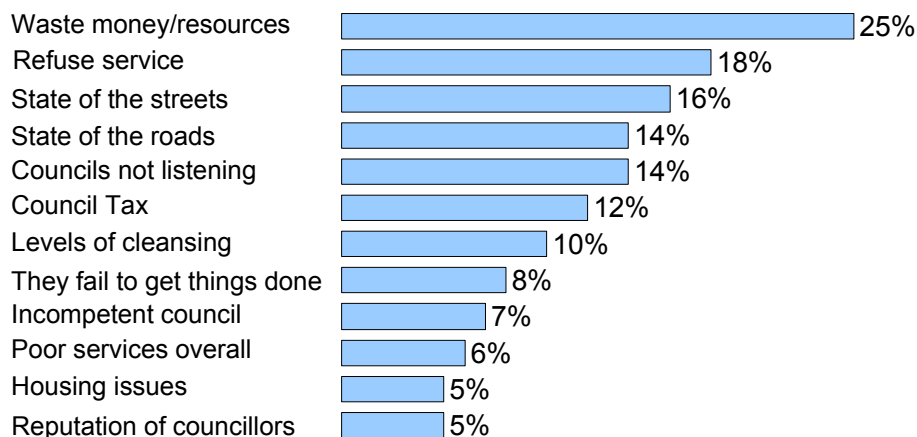
<sup>39</sup> Correlation is a standard statistical measurement of the degree of relationship or association between two sets of numbers (variables) to describe how closely they are related to one another. The notion does not necessarily imply causation since no direction of influence is known or can 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. A correlation of 0.00 means there is no relationship whatever between the variables.

## Value for money: a key driver of satisfaction

Value for money is frequently mentioned as another key source of dissatisfaction when residents are explicitly asked why they are unhappy with the performance of their council. For example, an Ipsos MORI telephone survey in October 2007 found that wasting money and resources was the principal reason why people who were dissatisfied with their council felt the way they did<sup>40</sup>.

### Reasons for dissatisfaction with council

Q Why do you say that (that you are dissatisfied with the way your local council runs things)?



Base: All dissatisfied with the way their council runs things Oct 2007 - unprompted (207)

Source: Ipsos MORI

The reasons people give for dissatisfaction with their council should be used with some caution, owing to the fact that many give vague answers which could cover a range of issues. Nonetheless, this finding is supported by Ipsos MORI's analysis of the 2006/7 BVPI data, which found a correlation of **65%** between perceived value for money and overall council satisfaction. Interestingly, there is a much weaker correlation between overall satisfaction and *actual* levels of council tax<sup>41</sup>. This suggests attitudes towards councils are influenced not by how much council tax people pay as by the return they think they get for their money, and that is a matter of effective communication.

The 2006/07 BVPIs indicated around half of residents are unconvinced their council gives them good value for money, which makes it one of the top priorities for the 'My Council' campaign to address<sup>42</sup>. This proportion was slightly lower in research conducted for the Audit Commission in 2007, but still pointed to a public far from convinced about the degree to which they were receiving good value from their local authority<sup>43</sup>. This scepticism was also evident during the qualitative stage of the same Audit Commission project.

<sup>40</sup> Ipsos MORI Local Government District Tracker (2007)

<sup>41</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV: Place Shapers or Shaped by Place; Ipsos MORI (2007)

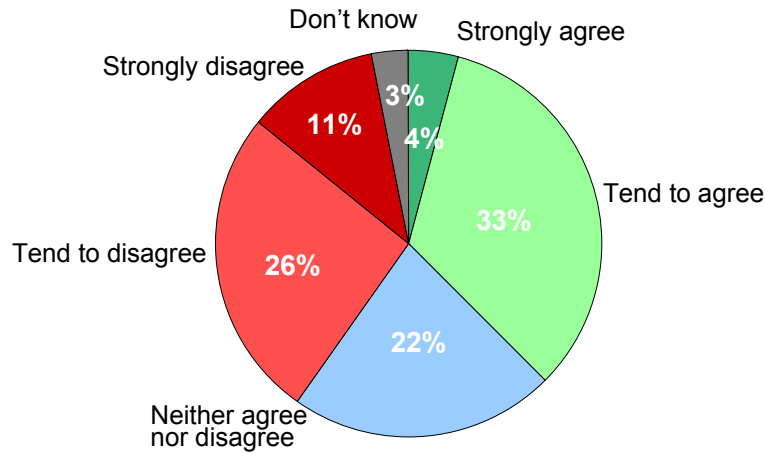
<sup>42</sup> Ipsos MORI overall BVPI data 2006/7

<sup>43</sup> Charging for Local Services: Key findings from qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of the Audit Commission; Ipsos MORI (2007)



## Public at large split on VFM

Q To what extent do you agree or disagree that the council provides good value for money?



Base: All respondents aged 18+ (1,941), fieldwork dates 23<sup>rd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> August 2007

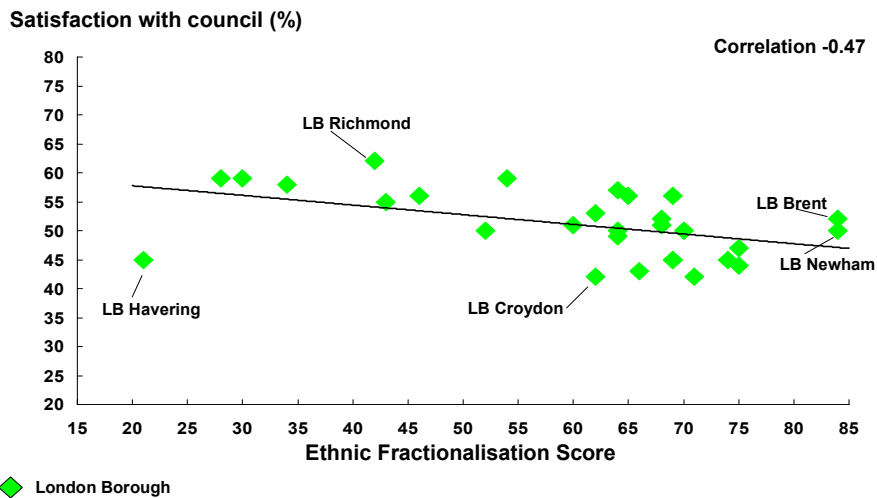
Source: Ipsos MORI

## The importance of 'place': diversity and deprivation

Ipsos MORI's Frontiers of Performance research on the 2003/4 and 2006/7 BVPI data has clearly highlighted the relationship between exogenous factors and public attitudes towards council performance. This applies similar techniques used by Ipsos MORI to examine attitudes to healthcare services according to the circumstances and characteristics of local areas.

For example, the relationship between ethnic fractionalisation (that is, how ethnically diverse an area is) and overall satisfaction with local government appears relatively weak in most areas of the country. The notable exception to this trend is in London, where the relationship is significantly stronger (a correlation of 47%, compared with just 4% nationwide)<sup>44</sup>.

### Frontiers Analysis: Satisfaction with Council (2006) and Ethnic Fractionalisation – London Boroughs



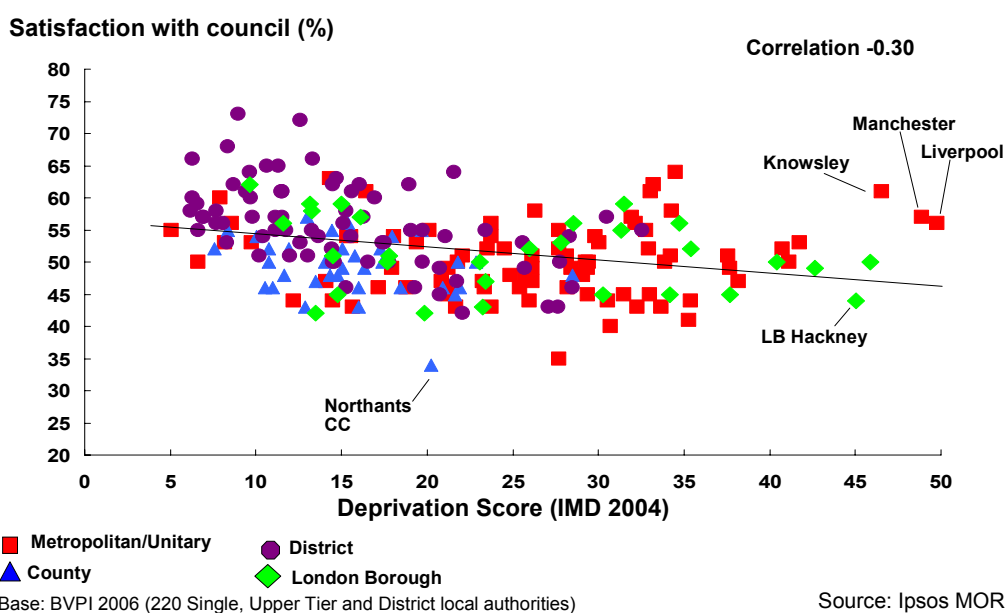
Base: BVPI 2006 (29 London Boroughs)

Source: Ipsos MORI

<sup>44</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV: Ipsos MORI (2007)

However, a slightly more complex relationship exists between overall satisfaction and deprivation (assessed using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which combine a range of variables to assess the overall deprivation of an area). Analysis of the 2006/07 BVPI data indicates that, while there is little clear relationship between deprivation and satisfaction with county councils (often due to their overall homogeneity), there is a link for district councils: the more deprived an area is, the lower its satisfaction ratings tend to be. However, among unitary and metropolitan authorities, satisfaction tends to be highest among those at the extremities (i.e. those with the highest *and* lowest IMD scores), whereas it is those with middling levels of deprivation where people are least happy with their council's performance.<sup>45</sup> One explanation might be that attitudes to councils in the poorest areas are being boosted by high profile extra funding (e.g., through the New Deal for Communities programme).

### Frontiers Analysis: Satisfaction with Council (2006) and Deprivation



Analysis for the Frontiers of Performance report also showed differences in attitudes to council performance according to the type of local authority concerned. For example, the 2006/07 BVPIs showed overall satisfaction across Inner London boroughs is better than the levels of ethnic diversity and deprivation would lead one to expect. On the other hand, district councils are evenly split between those that exceed and those that miss their anticipated level of satisfaction.

Similarly, just over half of metropolitan and unitary authorities achieved or out-performed their target satisfaction level, but the gap between the most and least successful of these types of council is particularly wide. Conversely, county councils have the narrowest gap between those that miss or exceed the level of satisfaction predicted for them. Consequently, theirs is the most easy to anticipate.

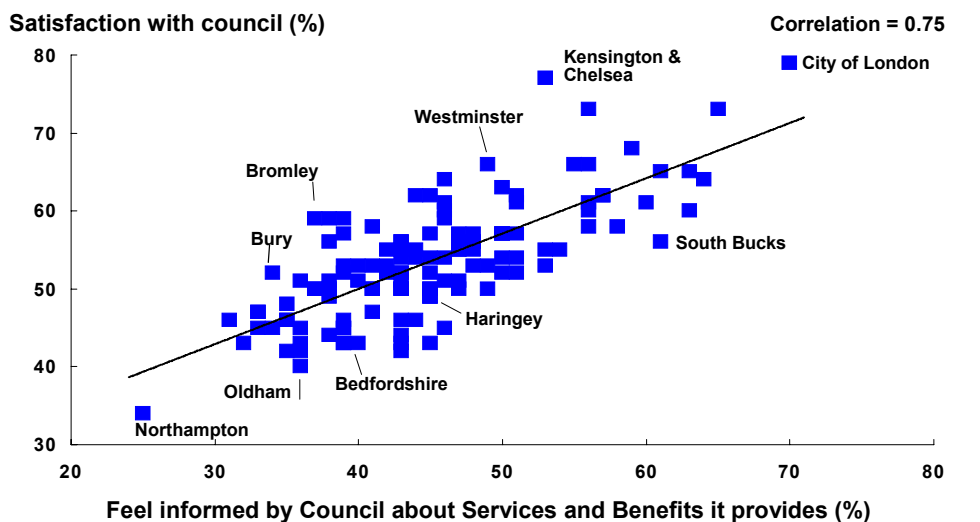
## Feeling informed

Evidence suggests that the degree to which a local authority communicates effectively with local people can have a powerful affect on how successfully they think it performs. For example, the data from the 2006/07 BVPI surveys show a high degree of correlation between the two factors, as depicted in the following chart. Those who reported themselves very satisfied with their local authority overall were much more likely to feel informed (48%) than ill-informed (3%) about the benefits and services their council provided. There is also a link between the extent to which residents think their council is 'remote and impersonal' and their overall satisfaction, though

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

the correlation is weaker than for other factors already mentioned such as perceived value for money and service quality<sup>46</sup>.

## Satisfaction and Feeling Informed



Base: BVPI 2006 (130 Single, Upper Tier and District Ipsos MORI client authorities)

Source: Ipsos MORI

As with value for money, however, evidence suggests that keeping residents informed is an area of weakness for many local authorities. Thus, the proportion of residents saying they felt informed by their local council fell from 51% to 42% between 2003/4 and 2006/7<sup>47</sup>. Indeed, a report for the Post Office in 1997 found that one in four people rated their local council as the worst agency at providing information compared to other public and private sector bodies.

Similarly, only half (50%) of the respondents on the People's Panel (a nationally representative panel of 5,000 convened for the Cabinet Office between 1998 and 2002) felt their local council keeps them either very or fairly well informed. This was not only far lower than the number of users who felt informed by companies such as BT (89%) but also lower than some council-run services such as local primary schools (89%), adult education (79%) and refuse collection (64%), highlighting a lack of awareness over who provides the information<sup>48</sup>.

Given that this is such a key driver of overall satisfaction, this may go some way to explaining the continuing disparity between satisfaction with the provision of specific services and overall satisfaction with local authorities. However, it does suggest that there is significant work to be done if the 'My Council' initiative is to build on the efforts of the Reputation Campaign in using effective communications to drive up overall satisfaction levels.

## Opportunities for participation

There is also a relatively strong correlation between the number of residents who feel they have enough opportunities for participation in their local area and satisfaction with how their council performs, as evidenced in the following chart. However, this does not necessarily mean that many people actually are satisfied with the opportunities for participation in their local area. Indeed, the 2006 BVPIs found that on average only 28% of people say they are satisfied with the opportunities the council gives them to take part in local decision making<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Frontiers of Performance in Local Government IV: Ipsos MORI (2007)

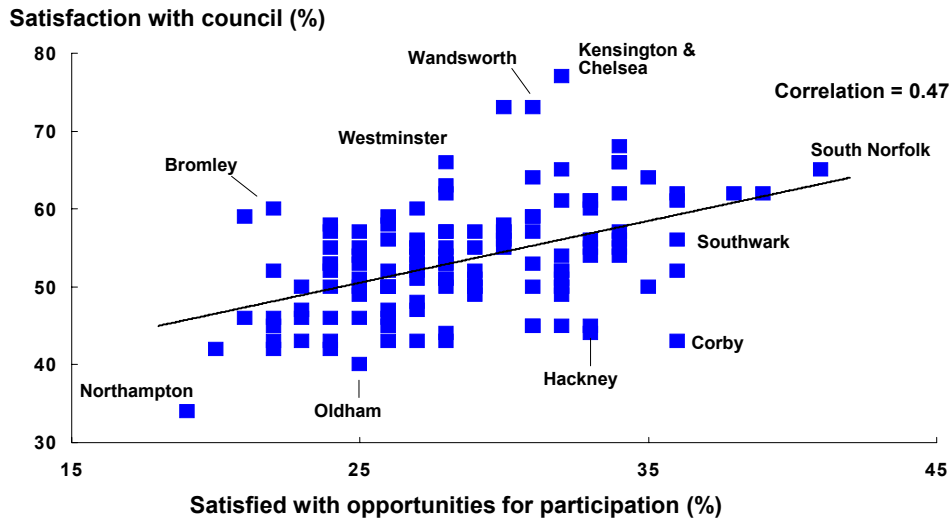
<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Connecting with Communities: The Case Study Evidence Part 1; Ipsos MORI/ ODPM/ LGA/ IDEA/ Audit Commission (2002)

<sup>49</sup> Ipsos MORI overall BVPI data 2006/7

Similarly, a Future Services Network poll in May 2007 found that 83% of consumers want more influence on how local services are being delivered<sup>50</sup>.

### “Opportunities for Participation” do seem to matter.....



Base: BVPI 2006 (130 Single, Upper Tier and District Ipsos MORI client authorities)

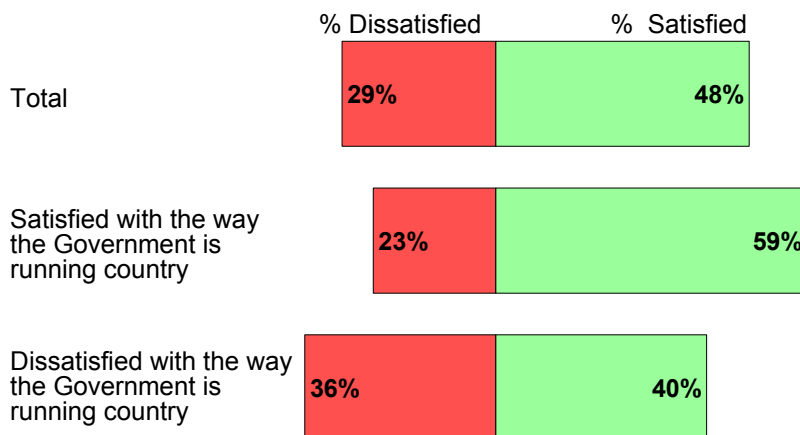
Source: Ipsos MORI

## The role of central government

In addition to these factors, the popularity or otherwise of central government can also play a role in determining levels of satisfaction with local authorities. As the following chart shows, evidence from the 2002 Ipsos MORI Omnibus documented that those who were satisfied with the way the Government was running the country were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the performance of their own local council<sup>51</sup>. Indeed, analysis of the 2006 BVPI data suggests that there is a 10-13% correlation between the Government’s own reputation and the public’s view of local authorities.

### Satisfaction with Local vs National Government

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



Base: 980 interviewed, 20-24 June 2002

Source: MORI

<sup>50</sup> Citizen Empowerment: Barriers of Engagement with Public Services; LGAAR (2008)

<sup>51</sup> What Drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government; MORI/LGA (2005)

## Perceptions of local government compared with other institutions

A survey of the Government's People's Panel in 2002 found that fewer respondents would speak highly of their local council than any other public service listed except local rail companies. The recent Citizenship Survey found that 32% of respondents in England and Wales said that they would not trust their local council very much, twice the proportion (16%) who would not trust the local police.

Nonetheless, more recent research suggests there is more trust posited in local officials than national politicians. A 2006 report on attitudes towards standards in public life found that respondents were more likely to trust their local councillor to tell the truth (43%) than MPs in general (29%) or government ministers (23%). However, this was a slightly lower figure than the 48% who would trust their own MP to tell the truth<sup>52</sup>.

## The importance of first hand experience

Analysis of the drivers of satisfaction with local government also indicates that residents' own first-hand experiences of contacting their council are crucial factors in determining their overall satisfaction levels with their authority. Indeed, as the following table indicates, satisfaction both with the way that their contact is handled, and with the outcome of that contact, are both strong indicators of residents' overall satisfaction with an authority<sup>53</sup>.

<b>Impact of Customer Care on overall satisfaction ratings</b>		
	<b>Satisfied with Council overall</b>	<b>Dissatisfied with Council overall</b>
<i>Base: All who had contacted Council in last year or so (1,097)</i>	%	%
<b>Outcome of contact</b>		
Satisfied	59	27
Dissatisfied	30	62
<b>Handling of contact</b>		
Satisfied	70	34
Dissatisfied	24	57

*Source: MORI*

These findings are supported by qualitative research. For example, in focus groups and workshops conducted for CLG in 2006, participants were quick to mention their unsatisfactory experiences with local authority staff, with reports centring on the failure of staff to ring back and answer queries and the length of time it takes for staff to resolve what residents perceive to be simple problems. The research went on to conclude that opinions of the council were often based on a very limited range of experiences, particularly issues surrounding liveability and street scene<sup>54</sup>.

Likewise, qualitative research undertaken in the development of the Reputation Project found that people were far less influenced by news stories or general views of local authorities than they were by their own personal experiences of dealing with local government. For example, when asked to think about 'local government' and

<sup>52</sup> Survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life, prepared for the Committee for Standards in Public Life, Ipsos MORI (2006)

<sup>53</sup> What Drives Public Satisfaction with Local Government; MORI/LGA (2005)

<sup>54</sup> Perceptions of Local Government in England: Key Findings from Qualitative Research; BMG/CLG (2006)

'local council', the first thing that people tended to think of was their own local council rather than local authorities as a whole. This meant that, rather than making associations with high profile failures, the public tended to draw on personal experiences at a local level, resulting in a low key, if on the whole rather negative, impression of local authorities. Rather than comparing their own council with local government as a whole, the research also found that participants tended to compare their council with neighbouring authorities; for example, residents in Harrow used Brent Council as an example<sup>55</sup>.

Finally, recent Ipsos MORI focus groups conducted for the Audit Commission also found that participants were far more likely to rely on their own experiences and those of friends and relatives to judge the performance of local services than independent assessments or inspection reports. For example, some participants in Barking and Dagenham and Hartlepool expressed surprise at their councils' CPA scores, and commented that they did not feel this reflected the reality of life in these authorities<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Understanding the Reputation of Local Government: Key Drivers and the Potential National v. Local Perception Gap; MORI/LGA (2005)

<sup>56</sup> Engaging the Public in the Development of Comprehensive Area Assessment: Citizen and User Groups for the Audit Commission ; Ipsos MORI (2008)

# What media are important?

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## Media focus is more often on specific councils rather than on local government as a whole

As the previous section suggests, the extent to which residents' perceptions of their local authority are influenced by factors outside of their own experience tends to be limited, with many relying largely on personal or anecdotal experience to form their opinion. This provides a salutary reminder that, although media coverage has been identified as one of the key drivers of overall satisfaction levels, we must not overstate its importance in shaping opinions of local government among residents.

Moreover, a 2005 report by Ipsos MORI indicated that local government does not get particularly extensive or prominent media coverage, particularly in the national press. What coverage there was tended to focus on the performance of individual councils (particularly in local newspapers). Even general discussion of local government issues tended to be related back to specific authorities. As many as 85% of the stories in the regional press related to specific councils alone and only 4% of stories related solely to local government in general. Even in the nationals, 63% of articles made some reference to an individual council. In other words, when referring to local government, both national and regional press tended to use specific councils as examples.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important not to discount the importance of local sources of information, whether appearing in local newspapers or produced by local councils themselves. For example, results from the 2006/07 BVPIs show that information provided by their council (in the form of newspapers, magazines and leaflets) was the source of information used by the highest proportion of residents (38%) to find out about their local authority, followed by local newspapers (cited by 31% of those questioned)<sup>58</sup>. Encouragingly, a 2005 MORI report on five years of local authority communications found that, although gossip is often a key channel of information, most people want to get news directly from their authority, not second-hand<sup>59</sup>.

This was paralleled in the same year by an Ipsos MORI survey on public attitudes to ethics in local and national government which found that local newspapers and council leaflets were the two sources from which respondents obtained most of their information about their local authority (see following table).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> How is local government reported in the press?; Ipsos MORI and LGA (2005)

<sup>58</sup> Ipsos MORI overall BVPI data 2006/7

<sup>59</sup> Five Years of Communications: A Review of Local Authority Communications; Ipsos MORI/ODPM/LGA/IDEA/Audit Commission (2005)

<sup>60</sup> Report for the Standards Board for England on the Public Perceptions of Ethics; Ipsos MORI (2005)

**From which of these sources do you get most of your information about your council?**

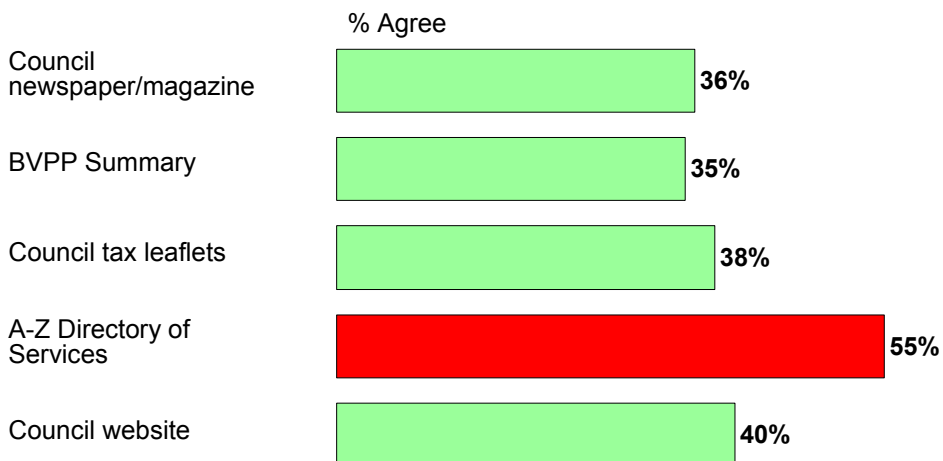
	%
Local newspapers	61
Leaflets from the Council	45
Friends and family	21
Local TV news	20
Local radio	10
Grapevine/ Rumour	10
Local council website	8
Posters/ hoardings	6
Civic Centre/ libraries	6
Citizens' Advice Bureaux/ CAB	2
Other	5
None of these	3
Don't know	1

*Source: Ipsos MORI*

However, as the Reputation Project business case highlighted, it is an A-Z guide of council services which is consistently rated as the most useful source of information of all the documents produced by local authorities. This ties in with the importance of value for money as one of the aforementioned key drivers of overall satisfaction, reinforcing the premium that residents place on knowing what services they are receiving from their local authority and how they can access them. Such guides also have the potential to go some way to tackling the lack of information that many residents seem to have about which local services are and are not provided by their local authority.

**A-Z most highly rated Council publication**

Q Overall, how useful do you find...



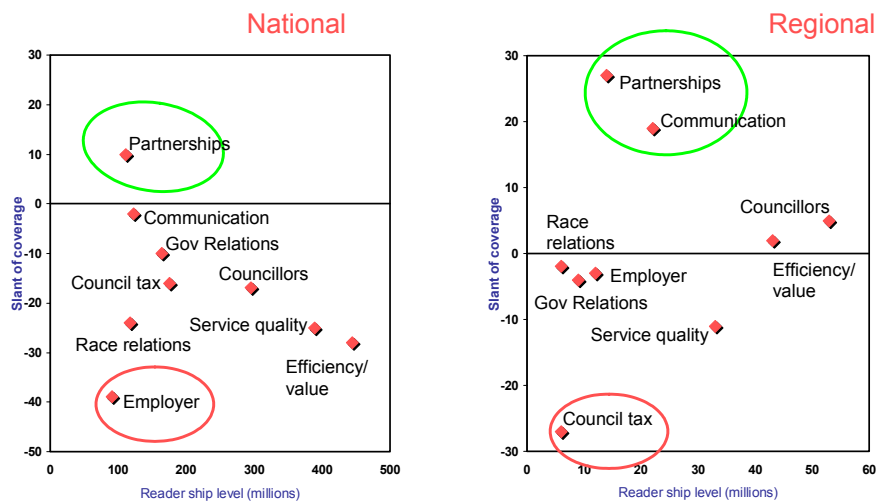
Source: Ipsos MORI



## Media coverage is more positive locally than nationally

2005 analysis of the media coverage of local authorities found that, whilst half of all coverage was neutral, local government tended to get a greater proportion of negative (39%) than positive coverage (10%).<sup>61</sup> Coverage about the role of local government, its services and its overall performance was found to be especially negative in the national press, which often focused on high impact stories concerned with crime and social services. The national press tended to pick up on local stories that had national implications, which were often built around individual council failures rather than successes. Indeed, in the nationals there was an inverse correlation between scale of coverage and slant (i.e. the more the coverage, the more negative it is).

### Coverage of local govt – national and local newspapers



Source: Ipsos MORI

The regional press tended to give more room to positive stories. Thus, while local coverage was also critical of social services, its coverage of other council services was often more favourable, particularly in the case of environmental and recreational services. Whereas in the national press, 27% of exposure about specific local services was negative and only 11% positive, in the regional media, these proportions were roughly reversed (11% negative, 30% positive)<sup>62</sup>.

Similarly, in a 2007 survey of its members by LG Communications, local and regional media were generally seen as relatively positive, especially with regard to regional radio and local newspapers (82% and 77% positive respectively). Results were far more mixed when it came to national media: 32% of national newspaper coverage was seen as positive, for example, while another 30% was seen as neither positive nor negative.<sup>63</sup> Only around a quarter of the coverage from national radio, television and internet news sites was seen as positive, however.

<sup>61</sup> How is Local Government Reported in the Press, LGA/Test Research (2005)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> LG Communications Survey of Members (2007)

How positive or negative, if at all, has the media coverage of your organisation been from each of the following sources in the last 12 months?		
Regional radio	Positive	82
	Negative	3
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>79</b>
Local newspapers	Positive	77
	Negative	11
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>66</b>
Regional newspapers	Positive	63
	Negative	3
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>60</b>
Regional television	Positive	64
	Negative	4
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>60</b>
Local internet news sites	Positive	62
	Negative	8
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>54</b>
Regional internet news sites	Positive	55
	Negative	1
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>54</b>
National internet news sites	Positive	26
	Negative	4
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>22</b>
National radio	Positive	26
	Negative	6
	Net positive (+/-)	20
	<i>Answered question</i>	122
National television	Positive	24
	Negative	6
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>18</b>
National newspapers	Positive	32
	Negative	15
	<b>Net positive (+/-)</b>	<b>17</b>

This suggests that local government communications may well benefit from the fact that local residents tend to receive much of their information from local sources, which do tend to be more positive.

However, the proportion of people who pay for local or regional papers is far lower than it is for national papers (though a much larger number read free local publications)<sup>64</sup>. This represents a major challenge to those responsible for local government communications, in terms of their need to spread their messages at a national level if they are to achieve maximum impact among the public.

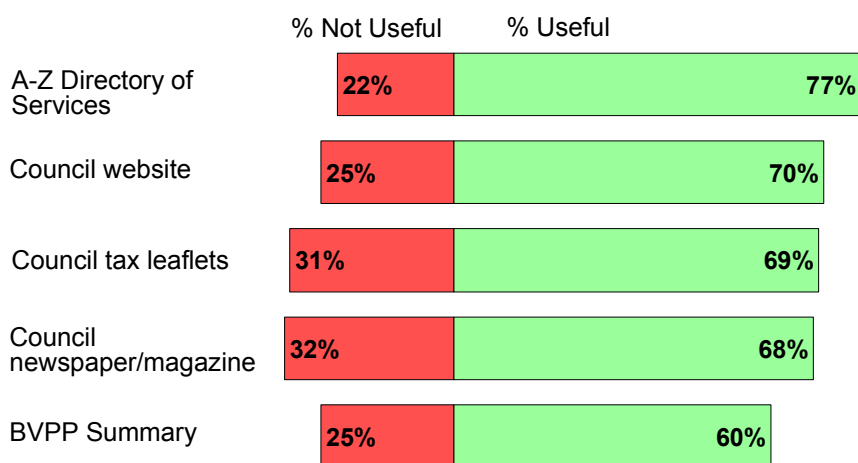
<sup>64</sup> National Readership Survey Readership Estimates April 07-March 08

## Limited take up of local government communications... but impressions often positive

Evidence points to a discrepancy between the apparent popularity of local government communications among residents on the one hand, and the limited take-up of those sources of information which are currently available on the other. A report in 2000 by DETR found that there was limited take up among residents of existing local government communications. For example, although 68% of people said that they had received an explanatory leaflet with their council tax bill, only 15% had actually read it. Although a higher proportion of those who had received a newspaper from their council reported that they read it every time that it was delivered, the proportion who did so was still just over a quarter (27%)<sup>65</sup>. Similarly, in research with residents in six case-study authorities conducted as part of the 2005 Connecting with Communities campaign, although council tax leaflets were found to be the source of council information recalled by the highest proportion of members of the public, 12% did not look at them at all and 17% only glanced at them<sup>66</sup>.

The same report, however, found that views were typically positive on the actual content and presentation of council information. Thus, the vast majority of respondents on the People's Panel agreed that the information in council magazines and newspapers, best value performance plan summaries, and council tax leaflets is easy to understand, clearly written and informative (though it is the magazines and newspapers which they rate most highly in this regard). Moreover, panellists were much more likely to judge all forms of council communication useful rather than not useful. This suggests that residents who do access such material are on the whole satisfied with the nature and content of local government communications.

### Perceived Usefulness of Council Communication



Base: All respondents; Connecting with Communities Report (2002)

Source: Ipsos MORI

Equally, many local authorities appear to feel that their efforts to communicate with their residents are proving relatively successful. For example, in a recent survey of LG Communications members, 96% of those questioned felt their organisation is good at managing the media, and 91% believed that the magazine or newspaper they send to residents is good. Around, two thirds (between 69% and 63%) thought their A-Z guide, corporate identity for services and internal communications was good<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> Revisiting Public Perceptions of Local Government, DETR, (2000)

<sup>66</sup> Connecting with Communities: The Case Study Evidence Part 1; Ipsos MORI/ ODPM/ LGA/ IDEA/ Audit Commission (2002)

<sup>67</sup> LG Communications Survey of Members (2007)

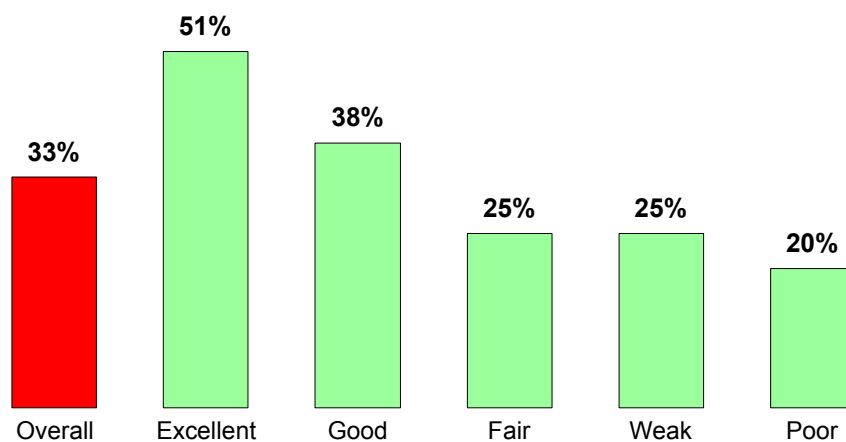
This suggests that the communications drive since the inception of the Reputation Campaign is having a positive effect. Surveys of both council officers and residents seem to suggest that the types of material local authorities are producing is good in terms of both style and content. The challenge for local councils now is therefore not only to ensure that the existing (and currently unmet) demand for council publications is met with the right types of material (particularly leaflets through the door and council newspapers, as discussed earlier). It is also to encourage people who might not currently think of reading such literature to do so. These will be important considerations as the My Council campaign gets off the ground.

## What is the importance of local government staff as advocates of the council?

In terms of information media, it is also important not to overlook council staff. Local government is estimated to employ 4% of the population, so what local authority employees say about their employer might have a significant affect on residents' perceptions of their council.

Analysis on staff attitudes confirms many other findings presented in this report – the best performing councils have the most effective communications and that includes its employees. There is a clear correlation between the willingness of council staff to speak highly of their authority to those outside the organisation and the authority's CPA score. Ipsos MORI surveys in both 2003 and 2005 found that employees working for those authorities rated excellent and good are more positive than employees in other authorities on most measures<sup>68</sup>. For example, employees of excellent district authorities are two and a half times more likely to agree strongly that they would speak highly of their organisation to others than those working for poor authorities.

*% Strongly agree they would speak highly of the authority to others outside the organisation*



Base: All respondents (500), Fieldwork dates 12<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> May 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

Furthermore, there is a recognised correlation in both the public and private sector (highlighted in the business case for the Reputation Project) between the willingness of staff to speak up for their employer and the willingness of the customers of the organisation to do so.

A report by ODPM on the Local Government Modernisation Agenda also found that there was a clear correlation between the views of council staff and the performance of the authority for which they worked. Thus, the interviews that they undertook in summer 2004 with more than 1,500 local government officers, including senior corporate officers and service managers, indicated that there was a statistically significant correlation between their views and the CPA scores for their authorities, in relation to service quality, value for money and

<sup>68</sup> CPA and Employee Attitudes, IDEA/MORI (2005)

responsiveness to the needs of service users. The survey results also pointed to a very similar picture to that suggested by the ODPM's basket of measures of cost effectiveness<sup>69</sup>.

Positively, a large majority of respondents to the meta-evaluation survey believed that their authority's services had improved over the last three years in terms of all of the key dimensions of improvement. However, there was a significant disparity between the views of service managers and corporate officers when it came to evaluating user satisfaction: the former were much more inclined to report increases in user satisfaction than the latter (77% compared to 56%).

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<sup>69</sup> Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda: Progress Report on Service Improvement in Local Government; ODPM (2005)

# Why join the My Council Campaign?

*Good communication is just as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after*

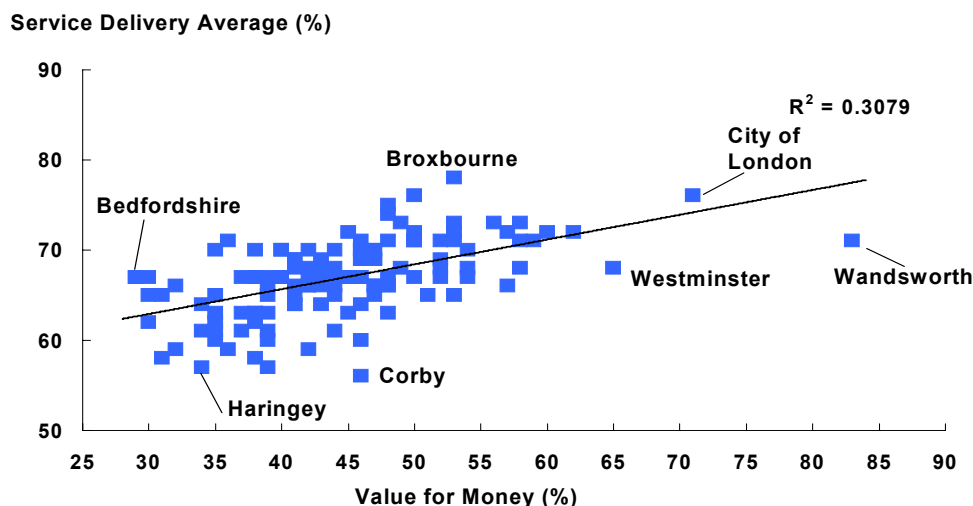
Anne Morrow Lindbergh, US Aviator

The last decade in local government has seen change followed by more change as institutions have been recast and recast again. In Whitehall, the DTLR has been succeeded by the DETR, then by the ODPM and now CLG. Performance regimes and systems for local political decision making have also changed radically.

However, some things have remained constant and one of them is the importance of effective communications. One of the most consistent messages of Ipsos MORI's local government research has been that if people don't know what their council does then they won't know what it does well, and in the current media climate that leaves local government's image at the mercy of other media. National newspapers in particular are more likely to cover local government negatively than positively. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if councils do not publicise what they do, then the public will form their impressions elsewhere from sources likely to be a lot less favourable to councils.

But what exactly are councils supposed to communicate? A decade of local government research shows that much of the answer lies in value for money and the quality of services. Not only do these two factors exert a strong affect on satisfaction with local councils, they overlap with one another. If residents feel informed about what their council does, they are more likely to be satisfied with its services. If they believe they receive high quality local services, they are more likely to think they get good value for money. It is a virtuous cycle.

## Service Delivery Average and Value for Money among Ipsos MORI Local Authorities



Base: BVPI 2006 (130 Single, Upper Tier and District Ipsos MORI client authorities)

Source: Ipsos MORI

The purpose of the 'My Council' campaign is to make sure this happens more often. In 2007, only 37% of people in England thought their local council gave them good value for money.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the 'perception gap' suggests that although people are happier with some prominent council services, the image of local

<sup>70</sup> Charging for Local Services: Key findings from qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of the Audit Commission; Ipsos MORI (2007)

authorities has not benefited as it might. BVPI data shows people are more satisfied than in 2003/4 with the cleanliness of their streets, their recycling facilities, their leisure centres and libraries. However, overall satisfaction with councils was much the same in the 2006/7 BVPI round (54%) as it had been three years earlier (55%).

Somewhere the message about services is getting lost. This is not surprising when many are unaware of what their council does and what their council tax is paying for. As has been shown, schools and social care are often not recognised as council services, even though they are, by far, the two largest sources of local government expenditure. On the other hand, councils are associated with policing and health services over which they have much less control. Whereas district councils gather much of the attention, their county council partners are often left in the shade. In a fog of misapprehension and faulty assumptions, it is not surprising local government's reputation sometimes suffers. The virtue of the 'My Council' campaign is that it addresses this point clearly and directly by saying what the council does that affects people's lives.

The good news for local authorities is that residents are receptive to such information. Belying traditional stereotypes, there is a widespread belief that local government does matter. Most people may not feel they know a great deal about their local authorities, but this should be seen in context. They say the same for most other political institutions. In fact, councils are seen to have an important affect on people's day-to-day lives, a more direct and palpable affect than Whitehall or Westminster. Interest in local issues is high and features often in people's conversations. Councillors may not be well known but people know they are there and they are seen as important sources of influence on local public services.

In addition, council literature is the source of information most frequently used by people trying to find out about their local authority. Frequently negative portrayals of local government in the national press must be counterbalanced not only by the more favourable coverage received in local papers, but by the capacity of councils to influence their image through their own communications. The positive reaction to A-Z directories of council services is a case in point. By laying out what services are provided, residents are given a gauge by which they can measure their councils' performance and they respond positively to it.

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