Committee	Central Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
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Performance Indicator on Overall Satisfaction

Report on Overall Satisfaction with Essex County Council
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Introduction

1.   At its meeting on 21 December, the Committee asked for a further report on this topic, covering three issues:

- what action plans exist to improve overall satisfaction with the Council;
- whether changes could be made to the questionnaire that is used for the place and tracker surveys; and
- what the survey data tells us about people who say that overall they are dissatisfied with Essex County Council.

2.   It is also worth reflecting on the value of satisfaction measures and how these might be improved.

Action planning

3.   There is no single action plan for overall satisfaction with the council as this measure is in a way the sum of everything else that is going on.

4.   Analysis of Essex survey data suggests that the real factors that might have an influence locally on overall satisfaction (as measured by the question, 'Overall, how satisfied are you with the way Essex County Council runs things?') are shaped by:

- service improvement targets driven by the LAA, Corporate Plan and the Transformation Programme;
- efforts through the customer excellence programme to make people have a better experience of transactions;

- efforts to improve public feelings of being able to influence decisions through the NI 4 action plan; and
- the quality and availability of public information as organised by External Communications.

5.	However, analysis by Ipsos MORI nationally suggests that extraneous factors are probably more important in shaping in attitudes. These include factors on which councils can have little or no effect, such as location in the country and socio-demographic composition of the area. In addition, national events can have an impact on local attitudes.

Service improvement

6.	Essex Works, the Corporate Plan and the Essex Local Area Agreement contain the Council's priorities and targets for services. These targets are designed to drive steady improvement. The Committee is part of a performance management system at officer, Member and partnership levels that scrutinises progress towards these targets.

7.	More fundamentally, the Council is engaged in its 'Customers First' transformation programme. This involves a major redesign of the organisation to direct resources towards service improvement, a better understanding of customer needs and a better experience for customers. External partners are helping with the process and a number of major transformation projects are under way.

Customer Excellence

8.	The Customer Excellence team has a portfolio of work, several strands of which are relevant here. Customer satisfaction is obviously a key metric.

9.	Specifically, the team is:

- Developing a customer interaction model which is defining staff behaviours in relation to the direct customer experience, how we handle this interaction and what we need to do to deliver a positive experience. This model has now been signed off by Keir Lynch
- Developing a range of customer service training modules which will become part of the core training programme of ECC
- Looking specifically at customer satisfaction measures. It is doing some work using customer journey mapping to design event driven satisfaction measures and is testing this on some specific services. This work also relates to the interaction model
- Completing the Respond pilot to collect customer feedback (mainly complaints) and exploring how this feedback can be used to improve service design
- Developing a new website. An improved site would be good for customer satisfaction. It would improve people's general perception of the Council and will offer an additional mechanism to collect customer satisfaction data.

Being able to influence decisions

10.   Feeling able to influence decisions has an impact on overall satisfaction. The Council is working with partners to have an impact on this through the Local Area Agreement target on National Indicator 4 (the percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions that have an effect on their locality).

11.   The main points are:

- Action by district strategic partnerships to develop more joined-up community engagement. Broadly speaking, this will be focused on those geographical areas or social groups where research suggests that feelings of influence are lower. The aim is to encourage agencies to work together in developing public engagement and improving feedback
- At county level, creation of a pilot online engagement channel called Essex Voice, working with Rural Community Council to develop guidance leaflets for community groups, provision of Engage Essex as a database of consultations, provision of 'You Said, We Did' campaigns
- Generally, support for the voluntary and community sector through the Essex Partnership, including the LAA engagement fund that enables VCS leaders to be target leads under the LAA, and the £2m endowed fund for the VCS; and the development of ECC's strategy for working with the VCS.

Communications about value-for-money

12.   Without the underlying substance of service improvement and gains in efficiency, no communications campaign will succeed. However, when developed on a firm base of such improvement, communications can:

- make people better informed, which helps them to make both collective and personal choices about public services;
- foster a greater sense of engagement in shaping policy and a greater willingness to intervene when inclined to do so; and
- help people to understand what services are available to them and how they can be accessed.

13.   The experience of Hammersmith & Fulham shows that campaigns like these can have an effect on performance indicators for both value-for-money and feeling well informed.

14.   In Essex we are:

- Starting in March, promoting a wider understanding of value-for-money through the Council Tax leaflet, the A-Z of Services, ECC's magazine, targeted advertising and an on-line savings tracker
- Developing ways of informing people about the real costs of services

- Targeting information about services to the dissatisfied group of people, using the most appropriate channels and messages
- Personalising stories, so that communications show how people have benefited from ECC's spending on services
- Promoting awareness of the transformation story.

Changes to the place survey questionnaire

15.   The Committee expressed an interest in looking at the Council's tracker survey questionnaire. This is for the most part based on the Government's place survey.

16.   Copies of both the place survey and the most recent tracker survey questionnaires are attached (in Annexes A and B respectively).

17.   We need to ensure that as far as possible, our own survey questionnaires:

- include questions that are statistically valid in terms of what they seek to measure (ie, they are properly focused on the issue, well worded and not ambiguous, and correlate with existing valid measures);
- provide consistent measurements over time so that trends can be identified (statistical reliability, ie, where there has been no change in circumstances, the result should be the same; no changes of wording that will significantly alter the meaning), and
- use questions that are compatible with the national place survey or similar data collections so that comparators can be studied.

18.   It can be difficult to satisfy all three of the above criteria at once, but it is usually feasible in practice to make a few changes from one questionnaire to another. The substantive differences between Annex A (the place survey) and Annex B (the most recent tracker) illustrate this:

- Questions 12 and 13 of the Tracker are not in the Place Survey (statements about Essex County Council)
- Section 5 of the Tracker is not in Place Survey (asking about what materials are recycled)
- At the end of the safety section in the Tracker there is an additional question not in the Place Survey (How good a job are the police doing?)
- In the demographics section, the Tracker asks about 'comfort level of current income' – which is not in Place Survey.

19.   For compatibility reasons, we need in the local tracker survey (which carries most of our perception-based performance indicators, eg, on fear of crime and anti-social behaviour) to use the postal methodology of the place survey. However, this can be supplemented with, for example, online sampling as well as long as the two different types of sub-sample can be distinguished at the analysis stage.

20.   The committee was interested in including a general comments box. This would be possible but ought to stand at the end of the questionnaire. It would not be advisable to lengthen the questionnaire significantly as this would depress response rates, which are already falling across the country.

What the data tells us about people who are dissatisfied overall

21.   The committee was interested in finding out more about the characteristics and attitudes of survey respondents who say they are actually dissatisfied with Essex County Council.

Attitudinal drivers of overall satisfaction

22.   In the summer of 2009, Ipsos MORI carried out a combined postal and online survey of Essex residents for the County Council. This survey was jointly designed by the public engagement and customer excellence teams to measure all the factors that might have an impact on satisfaction. As it did not have to be directly comparable with the place survey, there was considerable freedom to vary the questions.

23.   Using data from this survey, the public engagement team first grouped the questions into statistically coherent factors and then using these factors developed a comprehensive model of drivers of overall satisfaction with the council. The model explains 61% of the variance in the OS scores.

24.   Here are the factors in descending order of importance:

Factor	beta
Satisfaction with most services and VFM	.499
Satisfaction with local area and sense of belonging	.491
Influence over decision-making	.219
Level of use of Services	.201
Satisfaction with parks and libraries	.178
Interaction with ECC by phone, e-mail etc	.177

25.   The column headed 'beta' shows the relative importance of each factor.

26.   People who are dissatisfied with the County Council overall will tend to have given lower scores on these factors, just as people who are satisfied will have given higher ones.

27.   Surveys are designed to measure attitudes scientifically across populations, and do not usually offer much scope for personal stories. However, the Council's qualitative research with Ipsos MORI into people's views of services and value for money suggests that for the most part, people tend to draw on general impressions of the public sector in such discussions. These can be affected by public communications, media stories and word of mouth; but they will ultimately be shaped by experience somehow. However, if the Council wants to collect feedback to help it re-engineer services in

detail, then this has to be done with people who have recently used the service in question.

Demographic characteristics

28.   There most noticeable demographic differences between the satisfied and non-satisfied segments of the sample for the Ipsos MORI survey mentioned above are shown in the following table. For example, one is more likely to find female respondents in the 'satisfied' group, where they make up 57.3% of the group as opposed to just under 51% in the non-satisfied group.

Demographic category	sat group	non sat group
% Female	57.30%	50.80%
% good health	78.30%	76.10%
% own or buying household	79.30%	82.10%
% work full time	35.70%	44.50%
% retired	28.90%	19.30%
% over 45 years of age	63.00%	59.90%
% urban	70.50%	72.90%

29.   Some of these categories will be inter-related, ie, the satisfied group will contain a proportionately larger number of older females who are retired or not working. It is not clear why females should tend to take a more positive view, but this might be related to their level of use of services or the way they access services.

30.   Analysis of the data by Mosaic social marketing groups shows that the level of satisfaction is highest for these geo-demographic groups:

- Older people living in social housing with high care needs (48.9% satisfied)
- Independent older people with relatively active lifestyles (47.7% satisfied)
- Career professionals living in sought after locations (47.6%)

31.   The level of satisfaction is lowest for these groups:

- People living in social housing with uncertain employment in deprived areas (37.4%)
- Close-knit, inner city and manufacturing town communities (36.7%)

Value of satisfaction measures

32.   Overall satisfaction as currently measured is in a sense a valid measure of the Council's reputation. It records what people think in general terms about 'the council overall'. However, it is clear that many factors other than the quality of council services influence such judgements.

33.   Measuring satisfaction is clearly important. Councils are funded by taxpayers who have to accept a collective political choice about the level of taxation. Whether taxpayers and voters are satisfied with a council's activities is critically important feedback both for councils and for voters.

34.   Two projects are in hand in Essex to develop better measures:

- A set of questions of the general population about major aspects of the council's work, designed to produce an index of overall satisfaction from answers to more specific questions. This work is being initiated by the public engagement team.
- Satisfaction measures based on feedback transactions with customers. This work is already under way in the customer excellence team.

35.   Given the imminent General Election and the formation of a new Government, of whichever political party, there may be an opportunity for an Essex model to influence national policy on measures of satisfaction. The Committee might like to set up a task and finish group to work with officers on developing a suite of useful satisfaction measures.

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