

**AGENDA ITEM 4**  
**CS/21/09**

<b>Committee</b>	Central Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
<b>Date:</b>	21 December 2009	

Overall Satisfaction with Essex County Council

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The Council's performance indicator set out below has been identified as red under the RAG system:

Overall Satisfaction of residents with Essex County Council Ref LI 1

The indicator is included in the EssexWorks Corporate Plan/ Local Area Agreement Scorecard, and has been referred to the Committee because the indicator has consistently been assessed as red in 2008/09 against the target. In line with agreed practice the Committee will consider performance delivery and decide if a more detailed review of the issues and actions is required.

**Action Required:**

**The Committee is requested to scrutinise the performance indicator in question.**

## **CENTRAL SERVICES POLICY & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**21 DECEMBER 2009**

### **OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL**

Report by Duncan Wood  
Head of Public Engagement & Corporate Analysis

#### **Summary - fourteen key points**

1. A question about how well ECC runs things overall is included in the Government's Place Survey and our own Tracker Surveys
2. Statistically, the question seems to be a valid measure of reputation but may have lots of random 'noise' in the answers
3. Nearly 40% of respondents say they are 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', which points to the core importance of communications in improving satisfaction
4. ECC's score in the 2008 Place Survey was 46.5%, which placed us in the top quartile for county councils and just above the median for all types of authority
5. Broadly speaking, since 2006 there has been a downward trend in ECC's overall satisfaction scores. However, the drop is not as big as for other councils, ie, only 1.5% points for Essex as against an average of 7.5% points for all county councils
6. Some commentators think that national factors such as council tax rises, service scandals and the economic climate have a big impact on this indicator
7. ECC's score when broken down to district level is almost perfectly correlated with the district councils' scores, suggesting the two questions are measuring the same thing
8. ECC's score broken to district level is also strongly correlated with the districts' scores on the index of multiple deprivation
9. Women tend to be slightly more satisfied with ECC than men do; and so do older people compared with younger ones.
10. Although satisfaction with specific services stands at different levels, the pattern of change over time is very similar for them all. This suggests that changes in general attitudes towards the public sector shapes all satisfaction measures

11. 'How well informed people feel overall' is quite strongly correlated with overall satisfaction. Those who feel very well informed have a satisfaction with ECC score on average of just over 80%. Those who do not feel informed at all have a satisfaction score of just over 20%.
12. By far the biggest key driver of overall satisfaction is 'perceptions of value-for-money'. This is confirmed by using two very different types of analysis
13. A neural network model predicts that if ECC's VFM score only is increased by 15% points from its 2008 level of 34.8%, overall satisfaction would rise to about 57%
14. Action is therefore being taken to communicate ECC's work more vigorously to the 37.8% of Place Survey respondents who are undecided on whether ECC offers value-for-money

## **MAIN REPORT**

### **1. What is the measure?**

The measure is based on a Place Survey<sup>1</sup> question that was also previously in the Best Value Performance Survey:

*Overall, how satisfied are you with the way Essex County Council runs things?*

The score is calculated by adding together those who say 'very or fairly satisfied' and expressing this as a percentage of those who give a definite answer.

The Place Survey is a postal survey of a random sample of the adult population. It is carried out to standards set by the Government. In between these surveys being collected, Essex County Council administers their own random postal survey series called Tracker Surveys – which can monitor any changes in the interim periods.

### **2. Is it a useful measure?**

It is in principle a valid measure of the Council's overall or background reputation among citizens.

However, the following points need to be made:

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<sup>1</sup> The Place Survey is a postal survey of a random sample of the adult population. It is carried out to standards set by the Government. In between these surveys being collected, Essex County Council administers their own random postal survey series called Tracker Surveys – which can monitor any changes in the interim periods.

- It is not actually a National Indicator, which may reflect some doubt in Government about its reliability
- Statistically, it will include a lot of random error: it will register the effects of very diverse experiences respondents have had as the sample changes
- Its pattern of change over time may well be influenced by very general attitudes towards the public sector as well as actual personal experiences
- Satisfaction with specific services is usually higher

### 3. **Methodological issues affecting this report**

There are several statistics for overall satisfaction with Essex County Council available from the Place Survey 2008. The reasons for this are:

- There are two data sources. One is a survey commissioned by Essex County Council with a sample of 1,462. The other is a combination of the Essex district surveys with a sample size of 16,354. ECC ran a separate survey to get early data for performance indicators and this is the one the Government has used for ECC's performance indicators. From an analytical point of view, however, the combined district survey is more powerful because of the larger sample size.
- The figures also depend on the weights used to adjust responses to match population structure. After consulting the UK Statistics Authority, the Government changed its own weighting scheme to include an 'inflation factor' that capped any increases in scores due to weighting. The Government has applied this weight to the ECC small sample. However, there is no corresponding official method for weighting the *combined* district sample. ECC officers have applied weights to this sample in a way that best matches the national methodology.

### 4. **How is ECC performing?**

The most recent comparative data is from the Place Survey 2008. This gives an overall satisfaction score of **46.5%**<sup>2</sup>.

For analytical purposes, we will use the combined district dataset. Figure 1 shows the distribution of overall satisfaction with ECC across the response categories from the 2008 Place Survey:

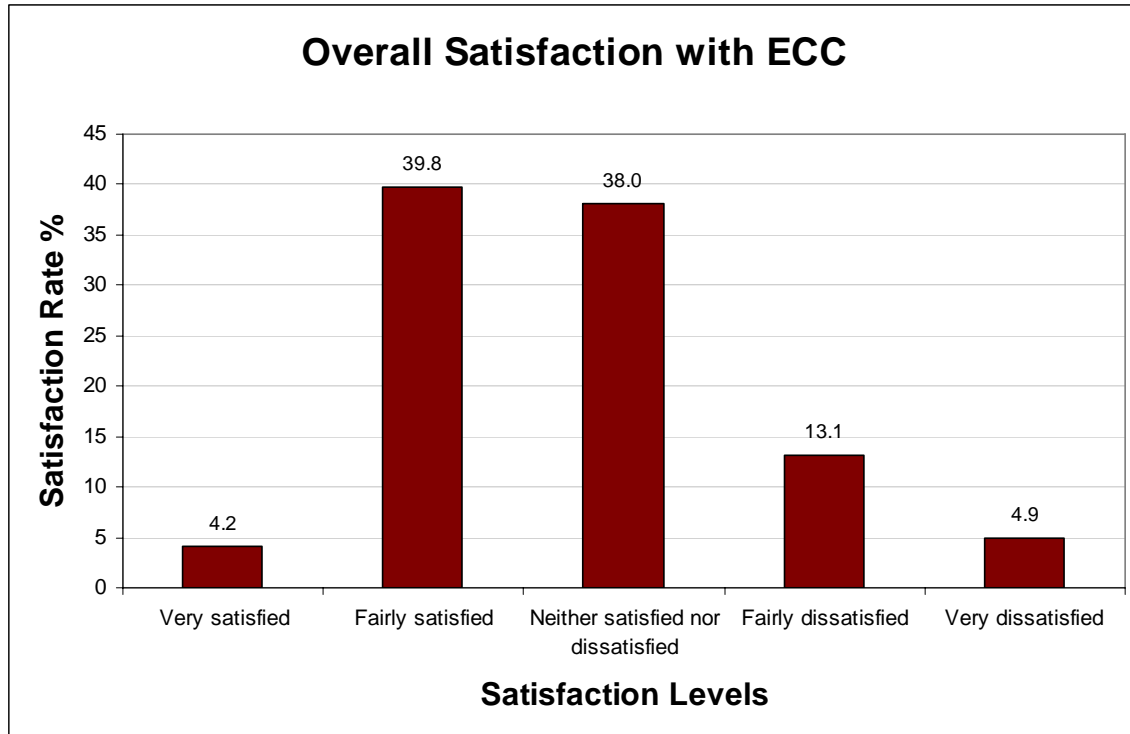
- Some 44% of people were either Very or Fairly satisfied

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on the ECC small sample survey.

- A large proportion of respondents (38%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- The proportion of people who were dissatisfied with Essex County Council was relatively small – only 18% were fairly or very dissatisfied.

**Figure 1: A graph to show overall satisfaction with Essex County Council, Place Survey 2008**



#### 4. How does ECC compare with other county councils?

The Essex County Council score at 46.5% falls in the top quartile of county council satisfaction ratings from the 2008 Place Survey. The median county council score was 42.5%.

**Figure 2: A table showing comparative satisfaction with council scores from the Place Survey 2008**

West Sussex County Council	48.8
Buckinghamshire County Council	47.3
Dorset County Council	46.5
Essex County Council	46.5
North Yorkshire County Council	46.1
Hampshire County Council	44.9
Norfolk County Council	44.4
Hertfordshire County Council	43.9
Warwickshire County Council	43.3
Devon County Council	43.2
Somerset County Council	43
Leicestershire County Council	42.9
Derbyshire County Council	42.8
Oxfordshire County Council	42.5
Suffolk County Council	42.4
Surrey County Council	42.1
Cambridgeshire County Council	40.8
Staffordshire County Council	40.7
Kent County Council	40.6
Gloucestershire County Council	40.3
Lancashire County Council	40.3
Nottinghamshire County Council	39.9
Worcestershire County Council	39.9
Lincolnshire County Council	39.6
East Sussex County Council	37.8
Cumbria County Council	35.5
Northamptonshire County Council	29.8

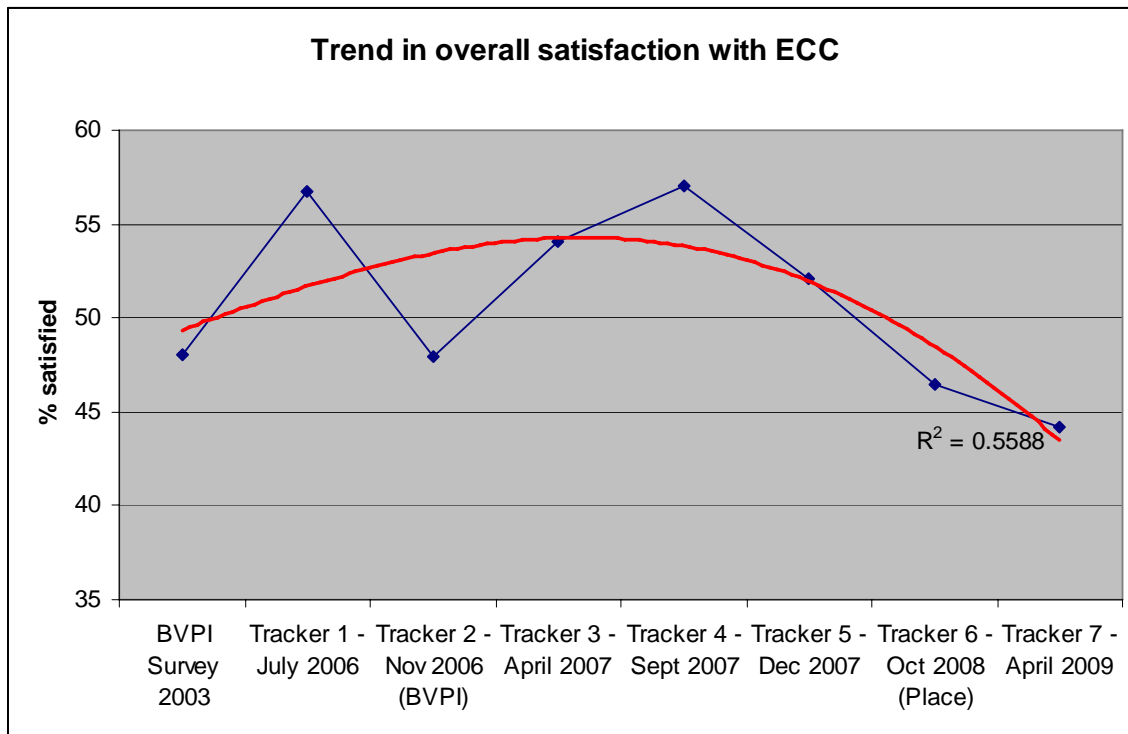
Source: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey2008>

For local authorities as a whole, ie, including every type of local authority, Essex County Council was in the upper quartile but very close to the median. The range across all authorities was from 22.4% (Oldham) up to 75.3% (Wandsworth), with a median of 45%.

## 5. What is the ECC trend?

There is a general downward trend in overall satisfaction with ECC over time though this includes quite a lot of fluctuation.

**Figure 3: A table showing satisfaction with ECC over time**



Comments on this graph are:

- Since the 2006 BVPI survey there has been a fall in scores generally in overall satisfaction. The median score in 2006 for all authorities was 53% and in 2008 it was 45%; for county councils, the median score has fallen from 50% to 42.5%. In contrast, Essex's score fell rather less from 48% to 46.5%
- Some of the fluctuation in scores appears to be related to the three Government led surveys, which have produced low scores roughly around 47%. This may be partly due to seasonal effects – they always occur in autumn with many responses coming in late – and partly due to the methodology which requires extensive 'chasing' of people who are slow to respond and annoys some
- Nationally, explanations suggested for the decline since 2006 include council tax rises, service scandals and the economic climate. Locally, the

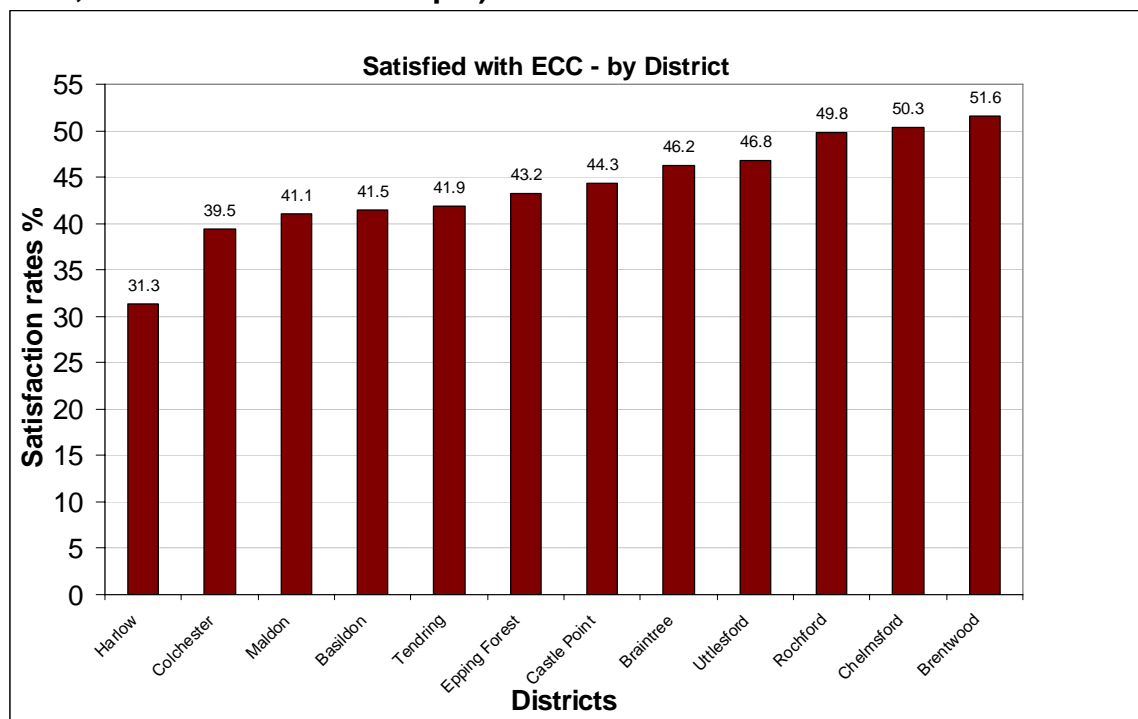
change appears to be due to more people saying they are 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' than saying they are actually dissatisfied.

## 6. Analysis by district

Figure 4 shows the variance in overall satisfaction with ECC by district.

Brentwood, Chelmsford and Rochford residents are the most satisfied. Harlow is the least satisfied and also has the highest proportion of people who said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with ECC.

**Figure 4: A graph showing satisfaction with ECC by district (Place Survey, 2008, combined district sample)**



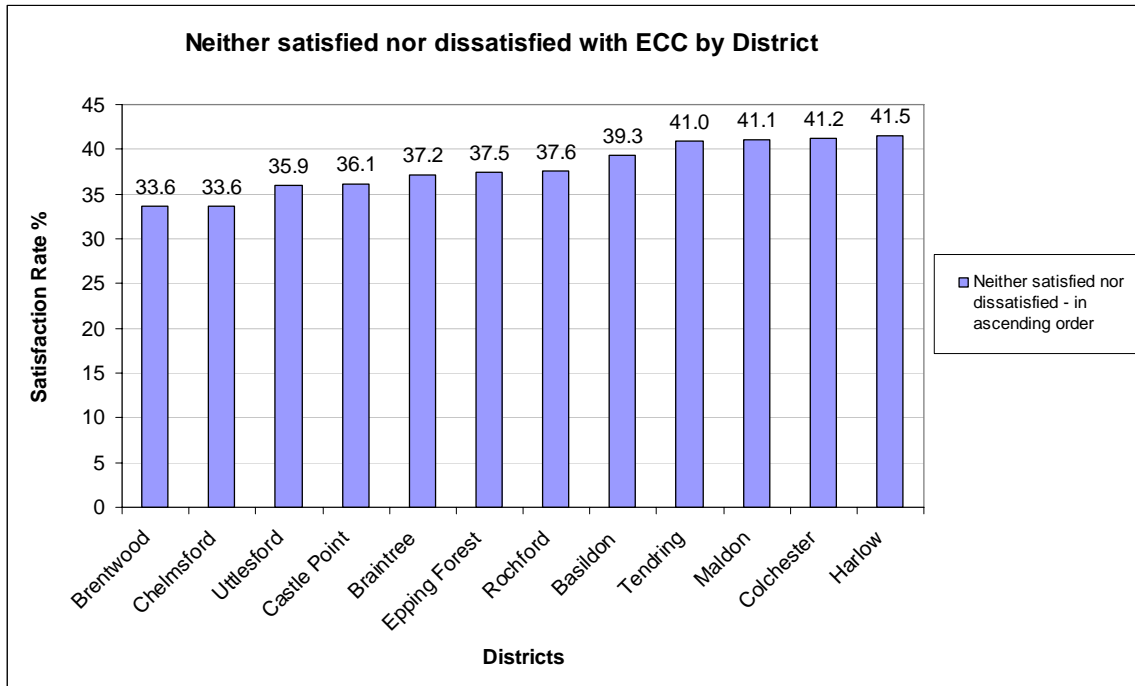
There are two comments to make on this graph:

- People appear to take the same view of ECC and their district council. There is an extremely strong and statistically significant correlation between the overall satisfaction score for ECC in each district and the overall satisfaction score for that district council. The correlation is 0.977, which is nearly perfect; and the likelihood that this is due to chance is less than 0.1%.
- The more deprived the district is, the lower the overall satisfaction score is that it returns for ECC. The correlation between district IMD score (where a low score indicates less deprivation) and satisfaction with ECC is -0.744,



which is pretty strong; and there is a less than 1% likelihood that this is due to chance.

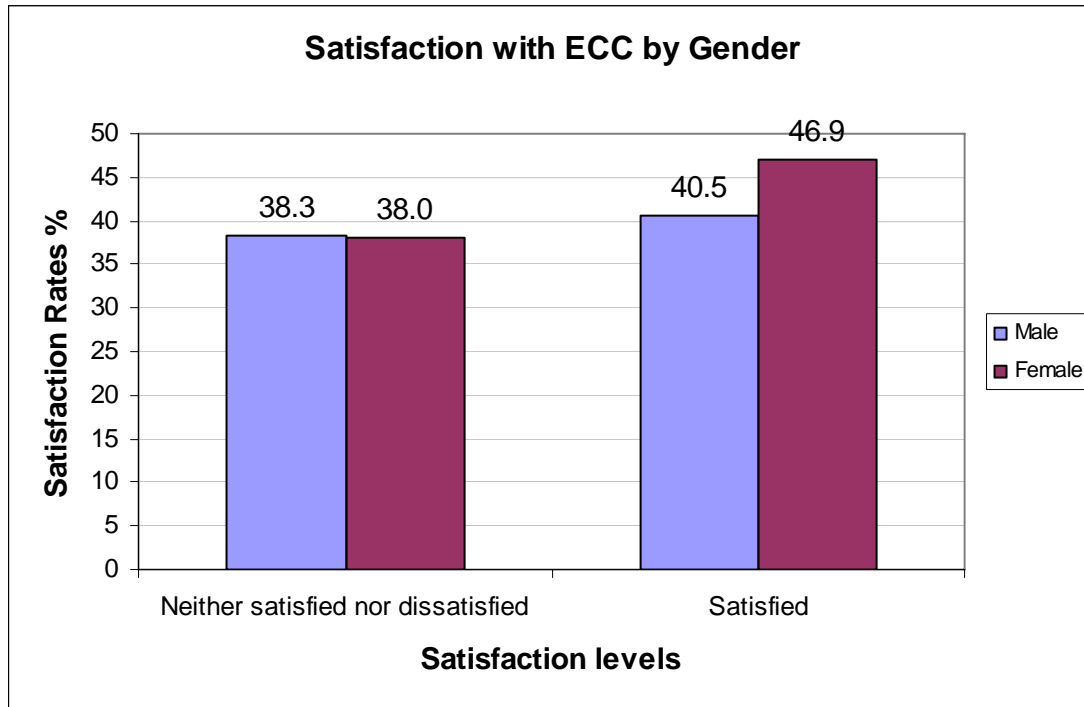
**Figure 5: A graph illustrating those neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with ECC (Place Survey 2008, combined district sample)**



## 7. Analysis by gender and age

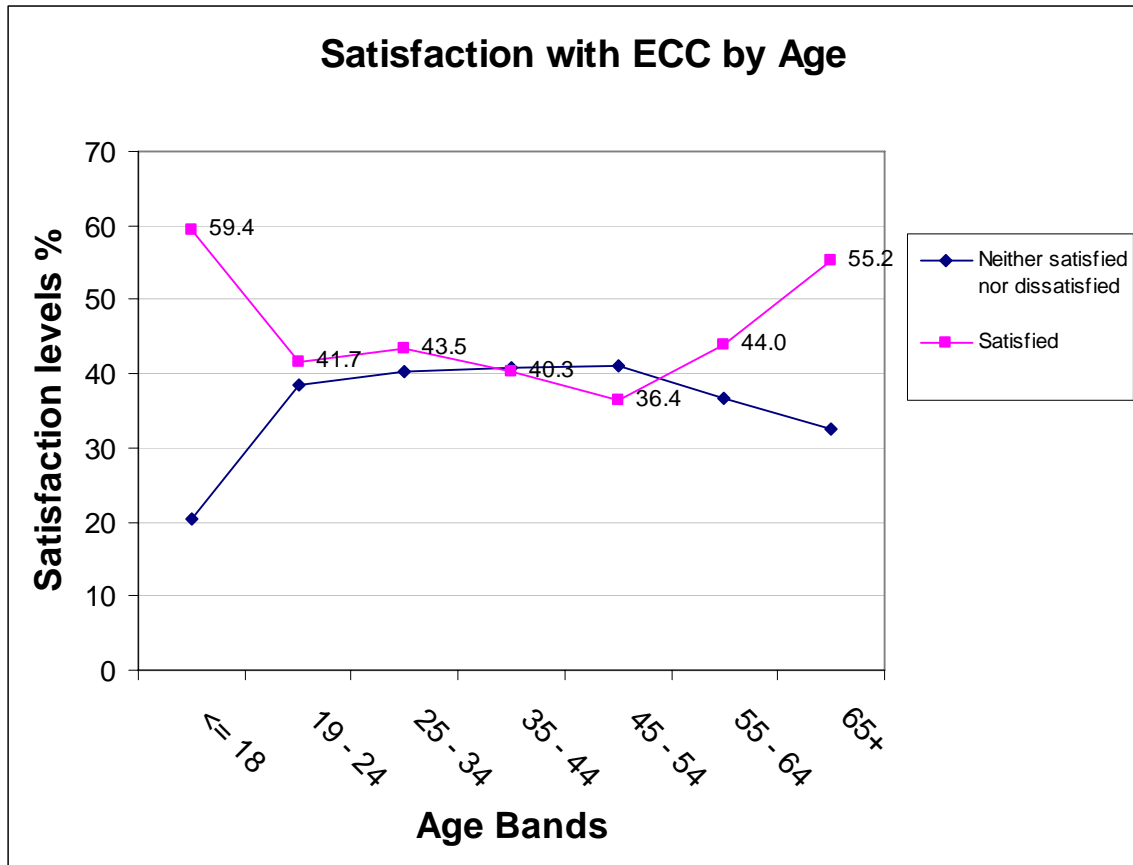
There was a marked difference of 6.4% points between men and women's satisfaction levels with Essex County Council.

**Figure 6: A graph showing satisfaction with ECC by gender (Place Survey 2008, combined district sample)**



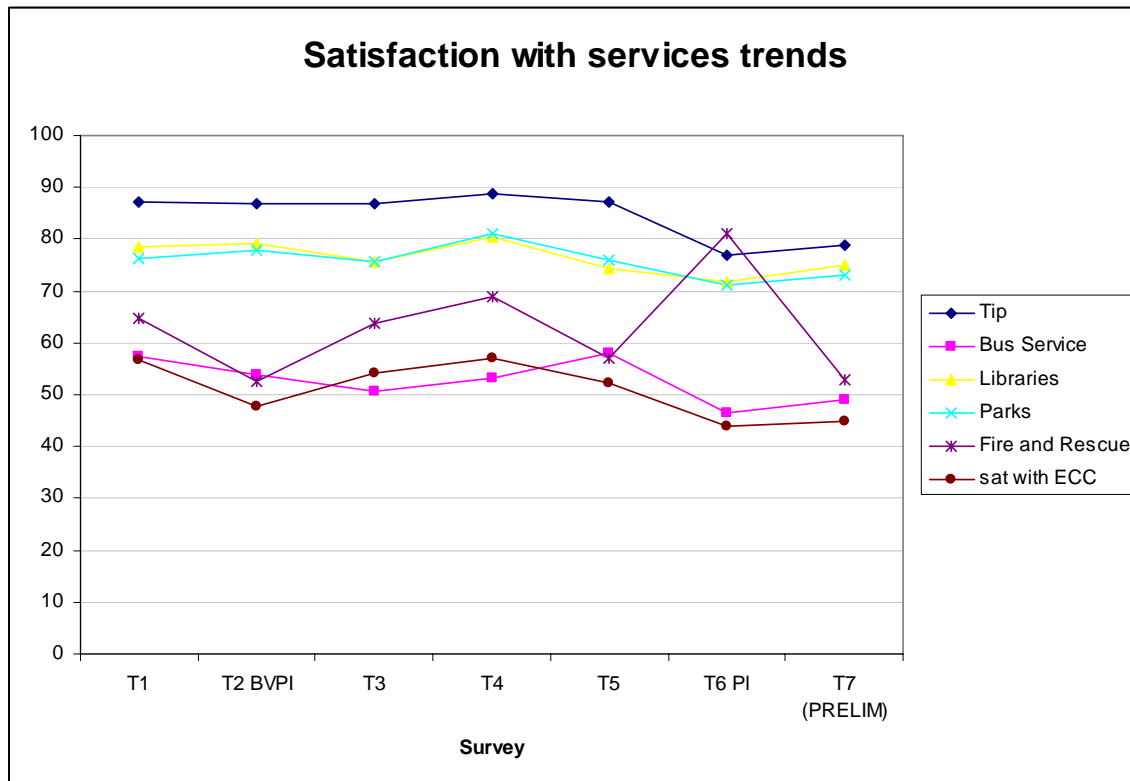
There was a significant difference with ECC satisfaction levels depending on the age band of the respondent. Those at either end of the age spectrum were most satisfied. The upward trend in satisfaction scores as age increases may just be as a result of age bias – e.g. increase in age will typically make respondents reply in a more positive manner. They also may feel more settled in the area in which they live so feel more satisfied with the services around them.

Figure 7: A graph showing satisfaction with ECC by age band (Place Survey 2008, combined district sample)



## 8. Individual services

Figure 8: A graph showing trends in satisfaction with services



There is a general downward trend on satisfaction with these particular services (excluding fire and rescue which has a small upward trend).

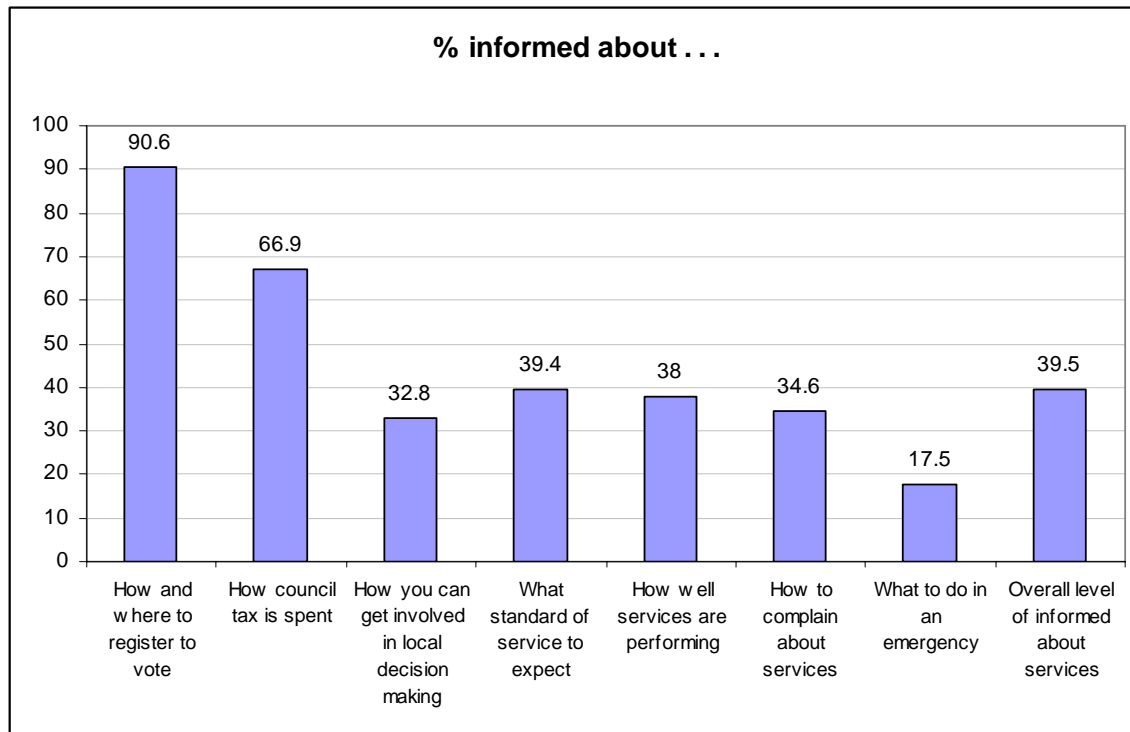
Satisfaction with specific services correlates significantly with satisfaction with ECC – so with a fall in service satisfaction scores, one would expect to see a decline in overall council satisfaction.

It is interesting to note that, broadly speaking, satisfaction with specific services follows the same pattern over time as overall satisfaction. This is even true of the Fire & Rescue Service apart from the 'spike' in the Place Survey. The similarity of the *patterns*, even though the actual numerical *levels* are different, suggests that variations over time may be driven to a large extent by changes in general feelings about public services rather than by service specific issues.

## 9. Relationship with how well informed people feel

Previous research shows that there is a strong relationship between 'how well informed' people feel and how satisfied they feel overall with the County Council. Figure 9 shows by way of background how well Essex people feel informed about various things.

**Figure 9: A graph showing how informed residents are about topics (Place Survey 2008, combined sample)**



There is a clear correlation between satisfaction with ECC and the level of how informed residents are on a number of factors. As residents become more informed, they are more likely to give a positive response to the satisfaction with county council question. The measure 'Overall level of informed about services' correlates most strongly with satisfaction with ECC – with a significant correlation of 0.406 as Figure 10 shows.

**Figure 10: A table showing level of how informed residents are and impact on satisfaction with ECC (Place Survey 2008, combined district sample)**

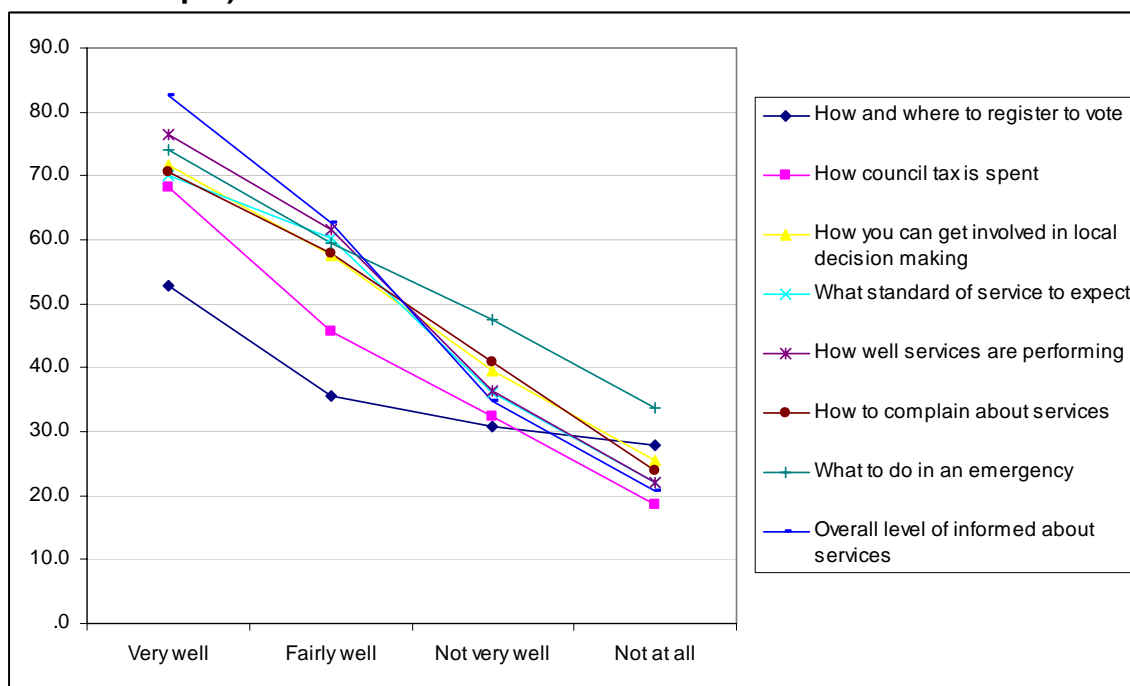
Level of informed and satisfaction with ECC	Very well	Fairly well	Not very well	Not at all	Correlation with Sat ECC
How and where to register to vote	52.9	35.5	30.8	28	0.181
What to do in an emergency	74.2	59.6	47.6	33.8	0.254
How you can get involved in local decision making	71.8	57.5	39.6	25.5	0.305
How council tax is spent	68.2	45.6	32.4	18.6	0.318
How to complain about services	70.6	57.9	40.8	24	0.325
What standard of service to expect	70.1	60.2	36	22	0.346
How well services are performing	76.4	61.6	36.3	22.1	0.374
Overall level of informed about services	82.5	62.6	34.9	20.8	0.406

Figure 11 shows graphically how overall satisfaction with ECC drops away as one moves from people who feel well informed to those who do not. The graph breaks the respondents into small groups according to how well informed they feel, and then shows the average overall satisfaction score within each of those groups.

For example, those who feel very well informed overall have an average overall satisfaction score above 80%. However, those who do not feel informed at all (overall) have an average overall satisfaction score of just over 20%. This is a massive difference of about 60% points.

Does this simply reflect two attitudes of alienated people that one would expect to find together? This may account for some of the pattern in the data. However, we have already seen the importance of the 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' group in the distribution of scores; and these two facts taken together indicate that good communications are crucial in driving up overall satisfaction.

**Figure 11: A graph showing how satisfaction with ECC scores change as level of how informed residents are changes (Place Survey 2008, combined district sample)**



## 10. Key drivers of overall satisfaction

We use a statistical technique called regression modelling to identify the key drivers of overall satisfaction with the County Council. By far the most important driver is positive perceptions of value for money, which in the Place Survey stood

at only 34.8% for Essex County Council. However, many respondents are undecided rather than negative.

A key drivers model built on the combined district data from 2008 accounts for just over 61% of the pattern of variance in the overall satisfaction with ECC.

Figure 12 shows the predictors included in this model. These are attitudinal predictors taken from other Place Survey questions. The number in the second column is the beta value, which shows how big an effect on overall satisfaction each predictor has.

**Figure 12: Key Predictors of overall satisfaction with ECC (Place Survey 2008, combined district data)**

Key Driver	Beta Value
Good perceptions of ECC value for money	.656
Treated with respect and consideration by public services	.107
Satisfaction with your home as a place to live	.060
Well informed about how well public services are performing	.047
Agree that local public services are working to make the area safer	.054
Satisfaction with local dentist	.040
Satisfaction with Libraries	.033
Safe outside after dark	.033

We have also recently carried out a neural network analysis of the national Place Survey data to identify key drivers of overall satisfaction. This method is able to capture complex relationships in the data that linear regression techniques can miss.

Figure 13 gives a sensitivity analysis table, which shows the effects of increasing each of the five main predictors of overall satisfaction singly (the others remaining the same) by 5, 10, 15 or 20 percentage points. The predictors are shown in rank order of effect from most important down to least. By far the biggest effect would be due to improving perceptions of value for money.

**Figure 13: Key drivers of overall satisfaction with councils – single effects of applying a neural network model to ECC data (based on scores for all English local authorities as published by CLG from Place Survey 2008)**

		Predicted overall satisfaction score for ECC				
<b>Drivers</b>	<b>ECC base score</b>	<b>Driver up 5 points</b>	<b>Driver up 10 points</b>	<b>Driver up 15 points</b>	<b>Driver up 20 points</b>	<b>Maximum increase</b>
value for money	<b>46.5</b>	50.2	53.6	56.6	59.4	12.9
Satisfaction with libraries	<b>46.5</b>	47.6	48.6	49.6	50.6	4.1
Satisfaction with sport and leisure facilities	<b>46.5</b>	47.3	48	48.8	49.5	3
% who agree that they can influence decisions in their local area (NI 4)	<b>46.5</b>	47.1	47.6	48.1	48.6	2.1
treated with respect and consideration by their local public services in the last year (NI 140)	<b>46.5</b>	47.1	47.6	48.1	48.5	2

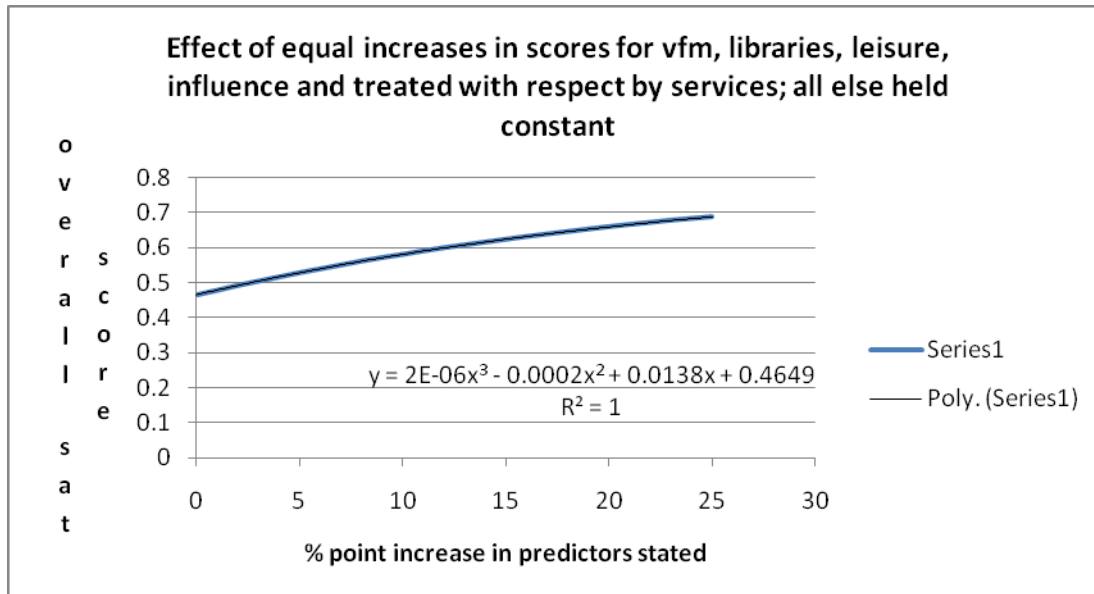
The neural network, which is generalising from data across the whole country, has discovered like the regression model on ECC data alone, that ‘perceptions of value-for-money’ is by far the biggest driver of overall satisfaction. However, it has for the most part identified different key drivers from the CLG ‘headline’ data.

One point worth making here is that the neural network analysis tends to confirm other evidence that when people answer survey questions about overall satisfaction with their council, they do not tend to think about ‘quality of life’ issues. For example, satisfaction with ECC has largely remained constant even though massive improvements have taken place in Essex on perceived levels of crime and anti-social behaviour and satisfaction with place. Moreover, on the neural net model of national data, satisfaction with the police in tackling crime and ASB is essentially unrelated to council satisfaction. This is frankly a surprise but does help to explain our recent experience.



Figure 14 shows the projected effect of improvements in the top five predictors together rather than singly and separately.

**Figure 14: Predicted effects of combined increases in top predictors in a neural network model applied to ECC data (based on scores for all English local authorities as published by CLG from Place Survey 2008)**



### **ACTION IN HAND**

- Given this analysis, work is in hand with the Communications Team to improve perceptions of value for money in regard to ECC.
- This campaign can of course build on the work that is actually being done to improve value for money – indeed, take it to excellent levels – through the Transformation Programme.
- Analysis of data shows that as with overall satisfaction, there is a large group of people – 37.8% in the combined district data - who are undecided as to whether ECC offers value-for-money. It is obviously important to target communications about ECC's activities at this group.
- A communications campaign is in hand based on an analysis of key drivers of attitudes towards value-for-money, geographical and demographic factors and communications guidance from the Mosaic social marketing dataset.