

MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Local authorities must ensure their services are informed by the needs and expectations of their communities, citizens and customers and that they are seen by customers and stakeholders alike as providing service quality. In order to know to what extent customer and public expectations are being met, it is necessary to collect data in order to measure satisfaction levels. This can be done in a variety of ways, both at local authority level and nationally.

There are a number of different uses that customer satisfaction research can be put to in a local authority context in Ireland, including

- to gain insight into levels of customer knowledge about services being provided,
- to highlight priorities for improvement within the individual services,
- to compare different units providing the same service,
- to compare different services, and
- to monitor changes in perceptions and performance over time.

But using measurements to make comparisons across different units or services requires an understanding of whether these comparisons are fair (whether we are comparing like with like). Similarly, comparisons over time need to be sensitive to changes in wider factors such as demographic changes.

In an Irish context, the *NOAC Strategy and Framework Work Programme 2020-2022* (NOAC, 2020) states that the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) is required to scrutinise the performance of local authorities and included in its brief is the need to look at 'customer service'. The work programme further states that it will continue to review 'local government customer satisfaction' and highlight 'consequential issues that need to be addressed' (NOAC, 2020: 4).

In 2018, NOAC contracted Ipsos MRBI to conduct customer satisfaction surveys in each local authority area, surveying approximately 10 local authorities annually so that over a three-year period, concluding in 2020, all local authorities will have been surveyed. The first survey, conducted in 2018, surveyed the 10 largest local authorities. The second survey, completed in March 2019, was conducted with the 10 medium-sized local authorities and Galway City. The remaining 10 local authorities are to be surveyed in 2020.

Roughly 100 interviews were completed per local authority. A total of 1,030 interviews were conducted in 2018 and 1,144 interviews in 2019. The intention is to complete roughly 3,100 interviews in total, to ensure that the results are statistically robust and provide a

benchmark for future surveys (NOAC, 2019: 5). The margin of error for the total sample for each of the 2018 and 2019 survey interviews is approximately +/- three per cent and is statistically robust. The margin of error for individual local authority results of 100 interviews is approximately +/- 10 per cent.

NOAC outlines its plan to pass responsibility for tracking customer satisfaction annually after 2020 to the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), stating that it will 'implement [the] 3rd phase of the customer satisfaction survey [in 2020] and then migrate same to the LGMA' (NOAC, 2020: 9).

Prior to the LGMA assuming responsibility for capturing data on national customer satisfaction, the County and City Management Association (CCMA) asked the Institute of Public Administration to conduct a research study into measuring customer satisfaction, to draw lessons from national and international good practice. The study encompasses both national customer satisfaction initiatives and also what might be done at local authority level.

1.2 TERMS OF REFERENCE AND RESEARCH APPROACH

This study looks at measuring customer satisfaction in local government at both (a) the level of the local authority, and (b) at a national level. This research project aims to

1. define customer satisfaction measurement in a local government context,
2. outline the range of methodologies that exist to facilitate customer satisfaction measurement at local and national levels, and the strengths and limitations of the different methodologies,
3. assess local, national and international practice, and identify and highlight a number of cases of good practice with regard to measuring customer satisfaction, and
4. highlight the data gathering implications of different approaches.

The study was primarily desk-based, having the following elements:

- Literature review. Review of the relevant literature on measuring customer satisfaction with a particular focus on clearly defining what is meant by measuring customer satisfaction in a local government setting.
- Documentary analysis. Careful review of relevant documentation (reports, background documentation, government policy papers, etc.) providing evidence of international and national best practice in terms of measuring customer satisfaction in local government and the public service more broadly.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 explores the definition and purposes of customer satisfaction measurement. In Chapter 3, data sources and methods that can be used to assess customer satisfaction are outlined. Chapter 4 examines the use of surveys to measure customer satisfaction. In Chapter 5, means of analysing and presenting the data produced are assessed. Finally, general conclusions are drawn in Chapter 6.

2 DEFINITIONS AND PURPOSES OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION MEASUREMENT

The nature of the local authority customer satisfaction surveys commissioned by NOAC to date raise some important issues for consideration in the measurement of customer satisfaction. In asking about direct experience with their local council, interviewees were asked had they personally made contact with their local council for any reason in the past five years. Around one-third of respondents indicated they had personally made contact in the past five years. This approach is problematic in assessing customer satisfaction levels for a couple of reasons. First, it means that approximately two-thirds of those interviewed had not had any direct contact with their local council in the past five years. Second, of those that had direct contact, there is no information on how recently within those five years, or how frequently, there had been contact. As will be suggested below, while this does not invalidate the usefulness of the NOAC surveys for assessing public satisfaction with local government, it is not a particularly useful approach for assessing customer satisfaction.

So before examining how best to measure customer satisfaction, it is necessary to get an understanding and clarity about precisely what is being measured. There are particular challenges associated with the definition and use of the terms 'customer' and 'satisfaction' in a public service context. Here, we examine some definitions and the literature associated with the use of the terms to provide a context for the remainder of the study.

2.1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERM 'CUSTOMER' IN A LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT?

As Table 2.1 illustrates, there are a number of possible descriptors for members of the public in terms of their relationship with public services such as local government. The term 'client' has often been used, with officials and politicians referring to clients and client groups. Burns et al. (1994) conclude that historically this could often reflect a 'we know best' attitude to the public which tended to predominate, with little meaningful engagement with the public as to defining and addressing their needs. As Humphreys (1997) notes, '[d]ue to such shortcomings, and in particular the comparative impotency of the public under a client system in terms of impacting upon the nature of the service being delivered to them by others, many of those striving to reform public services have dropped terms such as "client"'.

TABLE 2.1 FROM CLIENT TO CITIZEN

Description of member of the public	The service relationship is strongly shaped by:
Client	The dominance of the client by the professional
Customer	The experience of the customer in using the <i>organisation</i>
Consumer	The interest of the consumer in the product or service provided
Citizen	The concern of the citizen to influence public decisions which affect the quality of life.

Source: Humphreys (1997) based upon Burns et al. (1994)

Burns et al. (1994) note, in their critique, that, as a further stage of development, the concepts of ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen’ have come more to the fore because, in different ways, they focus on empowering the public as users and funders of services. The concept of ‘consumer’ refers essentially to the relationship of a person to a product or service. Whilst consumers in the private sector may be able to exercise considerable influence on the quality and development of the services they use, the situation is often far less clear cut with public services. Others prefer to use the term ‘citizen’ because it captures the fact that the public have both rights and responsibilities with regard to the service provider/user relationship. Also, citizens who are not service users are still likely to have an interest in the cost and efficiency of public service provision. However, it also is linked to the concept of ‘citizenship’, and some people living in a country would not be classed as citizens in that context.

However, from the perspective of this study we are interested in the term ‘customer’, referring to the experience of members of the public in using the services provided by an organisation, in this case the local authority. The customer is somebody who is a direct recipient of a service. However, it must be noted that the term ‘customer’ takes on a different aspect when used in a public service setting than in a private sector context. In the private sector, customers are usually free to choose between competing service providers, and to select on the basis of price and/or quality. Humphreys (1997) notes that:

With regard to the provision of public services, the provider/customer relationship is often more complex and indirect. Payment is not normally made directly for the service received and so customer control is weakened. Customer choice is very limited when provision is monopolistic. From the providers’ viewpoint, ability to pay is often not a key determinant of demand and accordingly market disciplines of price control frequently do not apply. Indeed, the providers ability to supply is likely to be determined by budgetary funding outside its direct control.

The Office of Public Service Reform (2002: 3) make related points:

Many models of service quality focus on the aim of increasing consumption of services and/or increasing customer loyalty. For many public services these considerations are in theory less relevant, as they are monopoly suppliers, customers are required to consume the services (such as regulatory services) or they are in fact the opposite of the aims of the service, where a reduction in consumption would be preferred (such as health and social services).

A further dimension to the term 'customer' which affects approaches to the measurement of customer satisfaction relates to how recently they have used the service. The American Customer Satisfaction Index, a long-established and highly regarded measurement tool, defines a customer as 'an individual chosen randomly from a large universe of potential buyers who qualifies by recent experience as a purchaser/user of products or services of specific companies or agencies that supply household consumers in the continental United States' (ACSI, 2008: 5). To be eligible for interview, either by telephone or online, a prospective respondent must qualify as the purchaser of specific products or services within defined time periods, for example, 'in the last month' for frequently purchased consumer goods and services. This issue of 'recent experience' as it applies to customer satisfaction has implications for customer satisfaction surveys and how they are designed and interpreted, as will be discussed later.

The time since a customer has engaged with a service has important implications for measuring customer satisfaction, and the interpretation of the results. Having had recent, direct experience is likely to lead to a more informed judgement. Van de Walle (2018), citing a study by Katz et al. (1977), notes that '[w]hen citizens have experienced services recently, their evaluations tend to be closer to the actual experience and further removed from stereotypes'.

2.2 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERM 'SATISFACTION'?

Van de Walle (2018) notes, '[t]hough intuitively appealing, satisfaction with public services is a complex phenomenon, combining expectations, experiences, and prior attitudes'. In reality, satisfaction with a public service is often based on subjective assessment and does not necessarily reflect either the performance or the quality of that service (Van Ryzin, 2008). Better performance or an improvement in quality does not automatically mean that satisfaction levels will increase. Andersen and Hjortskov (2015: 1), for example, have shown that satisfaction judgements are not 'consistently related to performance'.

There is some evidence that customer's satisfaction ratings are influenced by their pre-existing perceptions about that service. Van de Walle (2018) notes a comparative study of outcomes of satisfaction surveys in US local governments that found that certain types of services consistently receive better ratings: fire departments, for example, tend to do better than road repair services (Miller and Miller, 1991). Hypothetically, if a fire department received a satisfaction rating of 70 out of 100, for instance, it might place it as one of the lower rated services compared to other services, given the high regard in which it is held,

whereas if a road repair service of an authority received the same rating, it might more likely be one of the better performing authorities in this service area.

Van de Walle also provides evidence that, in satisfaction surveys, priming satisfaction ratings of specific services by first asking about the customer's general attitude towards public services can lead to considerably lower satisfaction ratings of the service, citing a study by Benton and Daly (1991). Many people have an anti-public sector bias where they unconsciously see public services as less efficient and of lower quality, which colours their assessment (Moynihan, 2017). Negativity bias is also evident, with information about low absolute performance reducing citizens' satisfaction but information about high performance not raising satisfaction (James and Moseley, 2014).

In satisfaction surveys, general opinions about government, politics, or bureaucracy therefore often appear to influence evaluations of individual public services. These effects are likely to be stronger when the service under scrutiny is of a more general nature, and weaker when the service is quite specific. In other words, when people are asked to evaluate government services in general, their opinion is more likely to be influenced by their biases and predispositions. If the service being assessed is very specific, the impact of their biases will be weaker. For example, Van Ryzin et al. (2008) found a strong correlation between New York City's street cleanliness scorecard and people's perceptions of street cleanliness, with general attitudes towards government having only a limited influence (Van de Walle and Van Ryzin, 2011).

2.3 MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

A couple of significant points emerge from this brief review. First, it is important to distinguish between measuring customer satisfaction and measuring public or citizen satisfaction. As the Office of Public Service Reform (2002: 3) notes,

[t]he two are distinct: when we are looking at customer satisfaction, we are asking questions directly about the delivery of services at an operational level; citizen surveys assess issues such as whether certain services should be provided by the public sector at all. The priority of users is for a better service, but as citizens they may also recognise that resources may be better used elsewhere.

Second, in defining the 'customer', a working definition for the study is:

An individual who has recent experience as a user of products or services of local authorities.

This addresses the issue that the more recent the experience, the more likely it is that the judgement about the level of satisfaction will be based on actual experience rather than pre-existing dispositions and biases. 'Recent' in this context means within a 12-month period.

3

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS FOR MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Different methods can be used by individual local authorities to get a sense of customer satisfaction either across the whole authority, or within a particular service area. They may also be used by central bodies such as the LGMA and NOAC, wishing to get an overview of satisfaction across local authorities.

Qualitative methods are useful in providing insights into, and understanding of, a service from the customers' perspective, and exploring in some depth their experiences and expectations. Quantitative methods provide measures of customer satisfaction and often provide statistically representative findings to aid the assessment of the performance of a service. A range of methods are outlined below. The benefits and limitations of the different approaches are then briefly set out.

3.1 SATISFACTION SURVEYS

Thijs (2011: 34) notes that '[a] survey is a systematic gathering of data that uses a questionnaire to gather the same information from each individual service user, usually based on a sample drawn from a wider population which may be all service users or a smaller sub-group. General surveys are useful to get a broad picture of the views of service users on a range of issues'. Different types of satisfaction surveys are possible, including face-to-face, via post, telephone, and web-based.

More information on satisfaction surveys is provided in Chapter 4, which goes into some detail on satisfaction surveys as a source of information on local authority performance with regard to customer satisfaction.

3.2 ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Administrative data held by local authorities can be a rich source of information. Examples include

- call volume data, e.g. waiting times, 'hang-ups' and answered calls;
- website statistics, e.g. number of people visiting a website, pages viewed and return visits;
- applications data, e.g. claims over a period of time; and
- timeliness data – time taken to respond to queries, applications, etc.

Website analysis, for example, can provide information on issues such as what search terms are the most popular, how and from where users access the site, the points in their journeys where users leave, which areas and pages are the most frequently visited, and how much time users spend looking at pages. Such information can provide useful insights into customer interests and behaviour.

As well as call volume data, call-back data can provide helpful insights, though it is less frequently captured. Research has been conducted that shows that with each follow-up call made by the customer, handling costs increase, and that with each follow-up call needed, the customer becomes less satisfied with the eventual action taken by the council. (Linnell, 2019).

South Dublin County Council tracks the number of customer contacts processed through the customer management System (CMS) (87,967 in 2019) and the average CMS contact time in days (5.19 in 2019). The council also tracks a number of other timeliness indicators, such as telephone calls answered within 20 seconds (92.34 per cent in 2019).

Source: South Dublin County Council Annual Report 2019

Kansas City surveys its customer service call desk (311 callers). Every 311 contact, whether via phone, web, or mobile, may be surveyed to assess the quality of services delivered by the city. The survey has just three questions asking for a rating on a scale of unacceptable to excellent. Two questions relate to the service provided and one to the 311 call experience.

311 callers whose call results in a service request (about twenty per cent of calls) are informed of the result of their call after the case is closed, and they are invited to take a feedback survey. All callers with associated contact information receive the survey. The survey reaches those who call as well as those who complete their service requests online or via mobile app. Every attempt is made to gather the caller's email address during the call to allow for a follow-up survey to be sent via email, the most cost-effective method. Callers who do not provide an email address receive a paper survey in the mail. Anonymous web users may fill out the survey online if they choose, but anonymous callers are not sent a survey. The response rate of ten per cent is high for such a survey, and provides enough data to perform statistically significant analysis by service category.

Analysis of results is done by activity type (e.g., graffiti removal) rather than by department. This provides clarity about which services require the most attention. Results are provided to the departments and are used in the city's monthly performance management (KCStat) meetings with the Mayor and City Manager (which are open to the public and livestreamed online). The results are also shared on the city's open data portal.

Source: Wiseman, 2015

3.3 FRONT LINE STAFF INFORMATION ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Front line staff are well placed to provide insights into how customers perceive satisfaction with the service provided, as they are in frequent contact with the public, often on a daily basis. Capturing this information in a systematic manner can often be challenging, and it is more often than not done in an ad-hoc manner rather than through formal recording of surveying of staff views.

3.4 CITIZEN/CUSTOMER PANELS

A growing feature internationally in recent years has been the use of citizen/customer panels to elicit the views of service users on a range of issues, including satisfaction. A panel is essentially 'a group of citizens/customers or service users who have consented to be part of a pool of people that will be used to select samples to take part in periodic research and consultation exercises' (Thijs, 2011:40).

Launched in October 2010, Your Dublin, Your Voice is an initiative of Dublin City Council that gives Dubliners and visitors alike an opportunity to provide opinions and views on what they love, like and would be glad to see improved in the capital region.

As the first local government led online opinion panel in Ireland, it seeks feedback and suggestions, via a maximum of four online surveys per year, on a range of issues that impact on quality of life in Dublin. Some 4,500 plus members, representing all backgrounds, and over sixty nationalities have registered on the panel since it was launched.

With regard to customer satisfaction, for example, a panel study on Social Media & Digital Local Services included questions and responses on how useful people found the city council's various social media channels, and ease or difficulty of use of the city council website.

Source: <http://www.dublincity.ie/main-menu-services-business-economic-development-local-enterprise-office/your-dublin-your-voice>

3.5 FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups provide an opportunity for in-depth qualitative interviews to be conducted with groups of service users. Generally, focus groups involve relatively small groups of people (typically 6-10) brought together to discuss a specific topic or topics. Group members are selected and invited on the basis that they have specific experience or knowledge about the topic. Thijs (2011: 42) notes that focus groups can be particularly useful for researching the views of numerically small groups whose views may be underrepresented in general surveys, such as minority ethnic communities or young people.

Local authorities may want to consider using focus group discussions to supplement customer satisfaction measures. They can be particularly helpful at the beginning of the measurement process, to help identify and define drivers of customer satisfaction, and also after measurement, to help interpret the results of the customer satisfaction surveys.

3.6 MYSTERY SHOPPING

Mystery shopping involves putting a trained person in contact (e.g. via visit, telephone call, email correspondence or web-based interaction) with an organisation to evaluate the quality of service provided, and in the context of this study provide a sense of the level of customer satisfaction with the service provided. The idea is to test out the actual customer experience of services. It might be used as a free-standing exercise, or to follow up an issue identified through other methods such as a satisfaction survey or after analysing recent complaints.

Table 3.1 provides an illustrative example of the kind of information that can be obtained from mystery shoppers, drawn from the experience of local government in Georgia in the USA, where they used mystery shopping to provide information on both face-to-face and telephone interactions.

TABLE 3.1 TELEPHONE CUSTOMER SERVICE CRITERIA AND OBSERVATIONS

Customer service criteria	Result (%)	Weight
Telephoning the Department/Office:		
How many times did the telephone ring before someone answered?	1.86	-
Were you placed on hold?	25	-
If placed on hold, how long?	40 seconds	-
Answering the telephone:		
Did the employee:		
Identify the department?	91	10
Identify himself/herself?	60	10
Offer to help you?	80	5
Use your name at any point in the transaction?	18	5
Did the employee:		
Ask questions to clarify your needs?	62	10
Attempt to answer your questions fully?	78	10
Seem genuinely concerned about providing an answer to your inquiry?	87	15
Refer you to another source?	70	-
Offer to help you with anything else?	39	10
Thank you or give you a pleasant closing statement?	71	5
Overall, was the employee:		
Pleasant and courteous?	91	10
Helpful?	90	10

Source: Bradbury and Milford, 2003: 211

3.7 USING COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS AS FEEDBACK

Complaints schemes can be a valuable source of customer feedback on dissatisfaction with aspects of service quality. Often, complaints are not unique and can point to a recurring difficulty in an organisation. If staff misunderstood a legislative or policy rule in one case, for example, it is quite possible that the rule was misapplied in other similar cases. The implication is that agencies should view complaints as a valuable source of intelligence on how effectively the agency is performing.

Thijs (2011: 46) also notes that '[a] system that also welcomes and records "compliments" can be highly valuable. It is linked to the idea of being appreciative and finding what is working and why, as well as what is not. Compliments and acknowledgements of efforts can have a positive impact on staff morale and performance, so it is important to consider how these comments can be fed back to staff'.

In Washington DC, city leadership partnered with a technology company, newBrandAnalytics, to develop Grade D.C. Grade D.C. operates a Web site where residents can fill out a survey about their experiences at any of fifteen agencies. It also combs Twitter and other Web sites for remarks residents may have made about their interactions with government agencies.

The reactions are rated, by a computer system called a sentiment analysis engine and then by humans, on a scale from one to ten. The numerical values assigned to every comment are tallied to determine the agency's monthly grade on the familiar A-to-F scale. The city publishes the results online. The public can see the last couple of monthly grades, including key issues identified and notes of appreciation for improvements.

Source: <https://grade.dc.gov>

3.8 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF DIFFERENT METHODS

Each method has different strengths and limitations. These are summarised in Table 3.2. For example, carrying out a survey or setting up a panel will clearly be more costly than using existing administrative data or gathering the views of front-line staff. But the latter methods do not directly involve the user and are more challenging with regard to eliciting customer preferences. When setting up a panel, members may differ from the wider population by the fact that they volunteered to take part, and over time may become more knowledgeable than the population that they are supposed to represent. Loss and replacement of panel members can also present challenges. Focus groups may not be the right course of action if the research issues are sensitive and inappropriate for group discussions. The quality and value of mystery shopping depends on the design and execution of the scenarios used to test service delivery.

No one method provides a complete picture of customer satisfaction. Often, using a combination of methods offers a broader perspective on customer satisfaction than using one method alone. With regard to providing reliable performance measures, however, to complement more basic data or more qualitative information, satisfaction surveys are an important source of information. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, satisfaction surveys are examined in detail in Chapter 4, including an assessment of the strengths and limitations of different types of surveys.

TABLE 3.2 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF DIFFERENT METHODS OF ASSESSING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

	Identifying potential for concrete improvement	Knowing customer desires and preferences	Representative	User participation	Price
Satisfaction survey	+	++	++	+	-
Administrative data	+/-	-	+	--	++
Front-line staff	+	+/-	+/-	--	++
Citizen/ customer panel	+	+	+/-	++	-
Focus group	+	++	+/-	+	+
Mystery shopping	++	+/-	+/-	-	-
Complaint / compliment analysis	++	+/-	-	+/-	+

Source: Adapted from Thijs, 2011

4 SURVEYS

Certainly, at a national level, and often also at local authority level, surveys of customer satisfaction are one of the main methods used to produce measures of customer satisfaction. At a national level, surveys can be used to provide a picture for the sector as a whole, and also to benchmark and track changes over time. A variety of options for survey design and data collection are available, and the different strengths and limitations of different approaches are explored here.

4.1 TIME SINCE PEOPLE LAST USED THE SERVICE

As noted in Chapter 2, in the local authority customer satisfaction surveys commissioned by NOAC to date, interviewees were asked had they personally made contact with their local council for any reason in the past five years. It is much more common in customer satisfaction surveys on public services to ask if there had been contact within the last 12 months. The reason for this is that the more recent the contact, the more accurate people's perceptions are likely to be, and the less influenced by general biases about government and public services in general.

The Irish Civil Service Customer Satisfaction Survey asks the public if they have had any interaction with government departments or offices over the last 12 months (Ipsos MRBI, 2019). The Kiwis Count survey asks New Zealanders about their experience of using 42 government services in the past 12 months (State Services Commission, 2019). In the South Australia Customer Satisfaction Survey, customers are defined as consumers and businesses that have had direct dealings with services provided by the South Australia government in the last 12 months (Government of South Australia, 2019).

4.2 MEASURING OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

As a starting point, most surveys of customer satisfaction with local government include a question or questions to assess the overall level of satisfaction with local government. Van Ryzin (2004) undertook a study comparing several single- and multi-item scales of overall satisfaction with local government services. His results suggest that multi-item scales generally perform better than single-item scales. In particular, a three-item scale used in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) (see Table 4.1) appeared to offer the best combination of reliability, validity, and practical utility.

TABLE 4.1 ASCI SCALE OVERALL SATISFACTION MEASURES

Label	Description	Scale
SATISFY	Satisfaction means many things. Overall, how SATISFIED are you with the services provided by the local government where you live?	1 = very dissatisfied to 7 = very satisfied
EXPCTCOM	Considering all of your EXPECTATIONS, to what extent have the services provided by your local government fallen short of your expectations or exceeded your expectations?	1 = fallen short of my expectations to 7 = exceeded my expectations
IDEALCOM	Forget the services currently provided by your local government for a moment. Instead, imagine the IDEAL local government services for you and your household. How well do you think the services currently provided by your local government compare with your ideal?	1 = very far from my ideal to 7 = very close to my ideal

Source: Van Ryzin, 2004: 12.

As Van Ryzin (2004: 15) notes, '[t]he rationale for these three indicators relies on the notion that an overall satisfaction judgment depends not just on a sensed degree of satisfaction but on a process of comparison to certain referents, with the consumers' prior expectations and their ideals identified as the most important and universal referents'.

4.3 DETERMINING THE QUESTIONS USED IN SURVEYS

In determining the questions to be asked in a survey, it is important to think through the objectives to be achieved. For instance, what are the goals: to assess customer satisfaction with the existing services in general, to get their ideas about designing new services, opinions about a certain part of the service delivery, and expectations with regard to service standards, and so on? As seen later in this chapter, as well as questions on satisfaction, it is also important to ask questions relating to drivers of satisfaction and around customer expectations.

The surveys conducted for NOAC to date are intended to provide a benchmark for future surveys, and as such provide a helpful basis with regard to the questions to be included in future surveys. Other templates are also available, which may helpfully provide additional sources of questions. For example, it could be helpful to ask some questions used in the Irish Civil Service Customer Satisfaction Survey, as this could provide helpful cross-public service comparative information. There are also other general guides, such as the Common Measurements Tool.

In 1997 the Canadian government developed the Common Measurements Tool (CMT). The CMT is a set of survey questions and scales that allows individual agencies to survey their own customers' satisfaction and identify service delivery improvements for service users. The CMT is intended to gather customer feedback, and is seen as distinct from citizen surveys. Customer surveys ask questions about the delivery of service at an operational level. This includes questions about specific details relating to the service delivery experience, such as how much time it took to be served, whether the staff were courteous and helpful, how convenient the facilities were, and so on. The CMT is specifically designed for use by public service organisations. It is built around five key elements: client expectations; perceptions of the service experience; satisfaction levels; levels of importance; and priorities for service improvements.

Potential users must purchase a license for the use of the CMT. A key part of the CMT is the core questions based on the drivers of service quality satisfaction (see *section 4.5 for a discussion of drivers*). The CMT also includes a wide range of other questions that can be used in surveys of customer satisfaction. By using questions set out in the CMT, public service organisations can benchmark internationally with Canada and other jurisdictions including New Zealand that adopt it. The tool is used by a number of municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal governments.

Sources: Schmidt and Strickland, 1998; New Zealand Government, 2011.

4.4 SCALES USED IN SURVEYS

Friedman and Amoo (1999) outline a number of different types of verbal rating scale that can be used to measure overall attitudes:

- *Satisfaction* scale (How satisfied are you with ...?) with response choices such as 'very satisfied', 'satisfied', 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied', and 'very dissatisfied'.
- *Expectations* scale (Overall, compared with what you expected, how would you rate ...?) with choices such as 'much better than expected', 'better than expected', 'about as expected', 'worse than expected', and 'much worse than expected'.
- *Compared to the ideal* scale (Compared to the ideal ..., how would you rate ...?) with the response choices typically being: 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'poor', and 'very poor'.
- *Performance* scale (Overall how would you rate ...?) with choices such as 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'poor', and 'very poor'.
- *Improvement* scale (Indicate the amount of improvement, if any, that is needed ...) with choices such as 'none', 'slight', 'some', 'much', and 'huge'.
- *Recommend* scale (How likely are you to recommend ... to a friend?) with the response choices being 'very likely', 'likely', 'neither likely nor unlikely', 'unlikely', and 'very unlikely'.

- *Requirements scale* (How often does using ... meet your requirements?) with the response choices being: 'always meets my requirements', 'usually meets my requirements', 'occasionally meets my requirements', 'rarely meets my requirements', and 'never meets my requirements'.
- *Regret scale* (How often, if at all, do you regret having selected/purchased ...?) with the response choices being: 'very often regret', 'often regret', 'sometimes regret', 'rarely regret', and 'never regret'.

Studies have shown that these different scales produce different responses. In general, 'expectations', 'improvement' and 'compared to ideal' scales tend to receive lower mean ratings than overall performance and satisfaction scales (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002). Rust et al. (1994) state that respondents are less likely to choose the most positive option in an expectations scale unless they really are extremely happy with the item at issue. They therefore suggest that it is more accurate than a performance or satisfaction scale, in which it is easier for respondents to give a positive answer. Similarly, a study by Friedman and Rosezweig (1999), comparing performance scales with improvement scales, suggests that respondents are more willing to describe an item as very good than to say it needed no improvements. They were also more likely to say the subject of the question needed a 'huge' amount of improvement than to describe it as very poor.

4.4.1 Modifying Terms

Using different types of modifying adverbs (such as fairly, quite, slightly, etc.) has been shown to have an effect on the type of response made in surveys (Worcester and Burns, 1975). This includes the fact that different words are interpreted differently – for example, 'fairly satisfied' is seen as a more moderate response than 'quite satisfied'. However, it has also been shown that 'fairly dissatisfied' is more negative than 'fairly satisfied' is positive. They are not equivalent in degree. This suggests that if you are planning to set targets for improvement in perceptions of services, it would be better to do so on the proportion of those responding 'very satisfied', which appears to be a relatively unequivocal positive assessment.

4.4.2 Numeric rating scales

The Office of Public Service Reform (2002) identifies two main issues with using numerical scales instead of verbal scales. Firstly, it is important to note that the assumption that there is equal distance between each point on a numeric scale is just as likely to be incorrect as the assumption that there are equal distances between points on a verbal scale. For example, if the scale is based on one-to-ten, a score of one-to-three is often likely to be regarded as particularly low, reminding people of low scores at school. There may therefore be a clustering of responses around points five-to-eight, which can make interpretation of responses more complex and less consistent.

Further, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that where only some points on a numeric scale have descriptions attached, for example the two extremes, there is

a tendency for respondents to gravitate towards those points that have descriptions and ignore numeric-only points. This can lead to biases in response.

Thought should also be given to the number of points on any scale. Generally, the more points used, the more reliable the results, as fewer points on the scale encourage respondents to treat the alternatives more as discrete rather than continuous variables. However, using too many points can lead to more variation without necessarily increasing precision. In their review of the literature, Friedman and Amoo (1999) suggest using any number from five-to-eleven point scales.

4.5 MEASURING DRIVERS OF SATISFACTION

As a study for the UK Government shows (HM Government, 2007: 6),

[c]ustomer satisfaction measurement allows an organisation to understand the key drivers that create satisfaction and dissatisfaction; and can also, importantly, help an organisation to differentiate between what people say influences how satisfied they are, and what is really driving their satisfaction during a service experience.

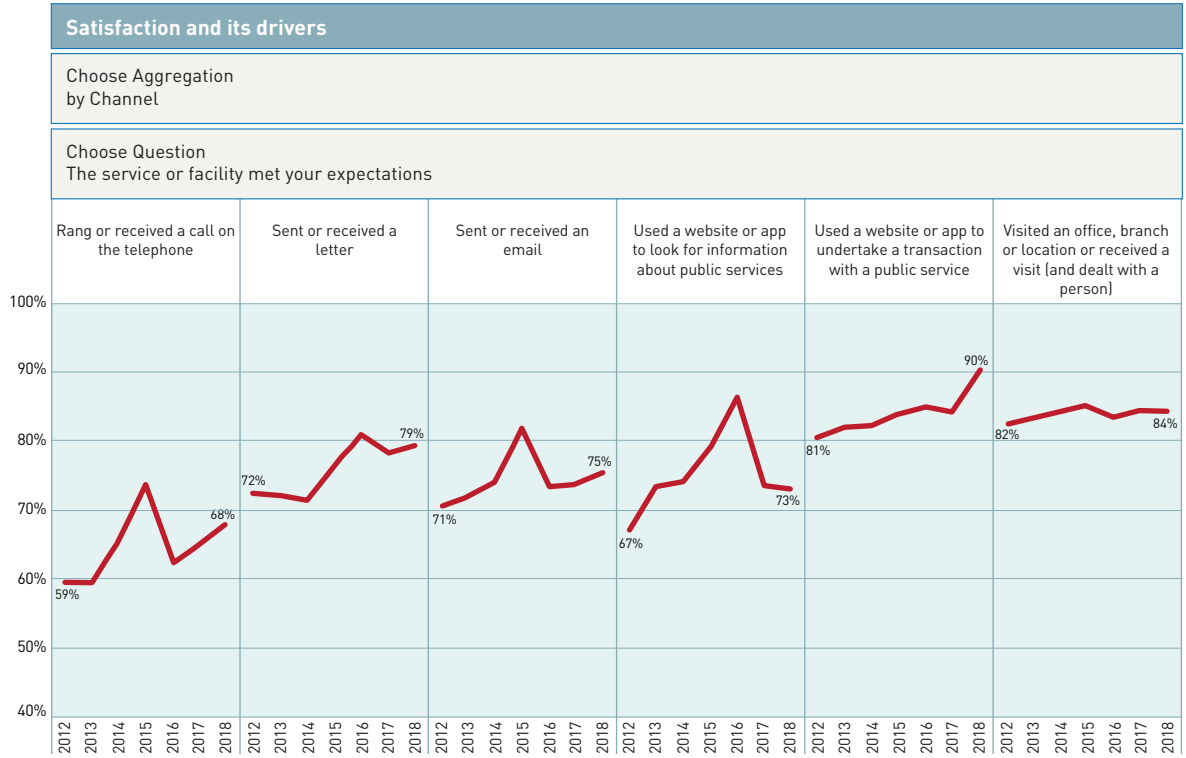
Identifying the drivers of satisfaction is therefore an important element in understanding them and how best to improve them.

In 2007, The State Services Commission undertook research to identify the key factors or drivers that have the greatest influence on New Zealanders' satisfaction with, and trust in, public services. They commissioned research undertaken by way of a telephone survey to identify the drivers of satisfaction. Since 2012 Kiwi Count has asked respondents to answer questions about aspects of their satisfaction (the driver questions) based on the channel used for the most recent service interaction. The drivers identified are:

- The service experience met your expectations.
- Staff were competent.
- Staff kept their promises, they did what they said they would do.
- You were treated fairly.
- You feel your individual circumstances were taken into account.
- It's an example of good value for tax dollars spent.

Research for the State Services Commission suggests that the most effective way to improve satisfaction with public services is for agencies to focus on these key drivers. However, not all drivers are equal: 'the service experience met your expectations' was found to be the most important driver, accounting for nearly one third of satisfaction with public services. The channels assessed are: face to face; email; accessing information online; making transactions online; phone; letter; and social media. Figure 4.1 shows the satisfaction scores from the Kiwi Counts survey for the different channels relating to the question on meeting expectations.

FIGURE 4.1 SATISFACTION AND EXPECTATIONS BY SERVICE CHANNEL



Source: State Services Commission, 2019

4.6 MEASURING EXPECTATIONS – GAP ANALYSIS

With regard to measuring expectations, it is important to know whether customer expectations are being met, and if there is a gap, the scale of that gap. The Accounts Commission for Scotland (1999: 2) gives an example of how it is possible to prioritise performance improvements inappropriately because we have an incomplete picture of customer expectations. Suppose 77 per cent of people were satisfied with the opening hours of a leisure centre and 63 per cent of users expressed satisfaction with the centre’s changing facilities in a survey. At face value, it appears that there is more of a need to improve performance in relation to changing facilities rather than in relation to opening hours, since the former’s satisfaction score is lower. However, it may be that changing facilities are not a particularly important feature of service for customers so, from their perspective, a lower level of satisfaction with this aspect of service is not problematic. On the other hand, opening hours may be a critical aspect of service and, despite an apparently high satisfaction score, the centre might still be failing to meet customers’ expectations in this context.

The Accounts Commission suggests that what is needed is two related questions on opening hours. One on the form to capture customer expectations of this particular aspect of service:

An excellent leisure service will have opening hours that are convenient to you.

And one on the form to provide information on what the customer perceives they currently get from the service:

Newtown's leisure service's opening hours are convenient to you.

With this information it is then possible to calculate a mean gap score for this aspect of service. A negative gap score implies that customer expectations are not being met. Negative scores are common in both the public and private sectors (Accounts Commission for Scotland, 1999: 4).

The library services department of one Scottish council applied gap analysis by surveying a sample of its users.

One of the questions asked related to how easy it was to understand the publicity and promotional literature used by the library. A seven-point scale was used where one represented poor performance and seven excellent performance. Those responding to the survey gave a mean score to the Library service of 5.7. Another question asked whether people felt the collection of books was sufficiently wide-ranging and balanced. Here, the mean score was 5.9.

Initially, it appeared from these results that library users are more satisfied with the book collection than they are with the publicity material. However, without an understanding of customer expectations this can be quite misleading. Because the library had incorporated questions about user expectations of service against these two aspects they were able to determine the gap scores:

Service feature	Mean expectation score	Mean perception score	Mean gap score
Publicity and promotional material	6.1	5.7	0.4
Book collection	6.8	5.9	0.9

What the service found was that from the customers' perspective there was a larger gap in terms of the 'quality' of the book collection than for the promotional literature (the two gap scores were statistically significantly different). This arose in spite of the fact that perceived satisfaction was higher for the collection aspect than for the publicity material aspect of the service. What becomes clear is that customers have particularly high expectations in the context of the book collection and because of these high expectations there is a larger gap between what they expect and what they feel they actually receive. This enabled managers to base improvement plans on those areas where the service quality gap is largest in relation to customer expectations.

Source: Accounts Commission for Scotland, 1999: 5

4.7 DATA COLLECTION

A wide range of means of collecting survey data are available. A summary of the main advantages and limitations of the most frequently used methods is outlined below, drawing in particular from Thijs (2011: 36):

Face-to-face surveys

- Surveys conducted face-to-face are able to collect fuller, more complex data.
- The use of an interviewer gives more control over who actually answers the questions. This is important with strict statistically representative sampling designs.
- Designed with care and well-administered they generally have better response rates than other types of survey.
- They are likely to be more expensive than other options.

Postal or self-completion surveys

- These are less reliable, need to be shorter than face-to-face surveys and use simple, 'tick boxes' types of questions.
- They can be cost-effective and provide anonymity which may prompt a better response rate for more sensitive topics.
- Whilst many organisations may prefer postal surveys on cost grounds, it may not always be the most appropriate approach.
- There is a higher risk that some groups will be over- or under-represented, such as those with language/literacy difficulties or with support needs.

Telephone surveys

- These need to be relatively short and straightforward.
- Some categories of people can be systematically under-represented.
- Telephone surveys may be useful for some service-specific surveys where there is a contact number for each person from which to draw a sample.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection uses computer-assisted telephone surveys of job seekers every 12 months: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e507d2-surveys-in-the-department-of-employment-affairs-and-social-protection/?referrer=https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Surveys-in-the-Department-of-Social-Protection.aspx#recent-and-current-projects>.

Web surveys

- The survey allows for design flexibility, and can be rapidly deployed and completed by the respondents, especially if there is an incentive that is given after their participation.
- Data input and handling is automated, which can facilitate fewer data errors and lower costs.

- The distribution of access to the web is not evenly spread across all sections of the population.
- Not best suited to open-ended questions as there is no trained interviewer to explore the answers of the respondents.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection uses web surveys of job seekers every six months: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e507d2-surveys-in-the-department-of-employment-affairs-and-social-protection/?referrer=https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Surveys-in-the-Department-of-Social-Protection.aspx#recent-and-current-projects>.

A large number of studies have been conducted, and most generally support the view that face-to-face research is most successful in reflecting the population and postal research the least successful. Postal and web surveys are likely to under-represent less motivated sections of the population (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002, p.39).

Length of time for the survey

A study undertaken for HM Government (2007) indicates that a rough guide for the maximum questionnaire length that should be used for the main data collection methods suggests:

- Online – five to 10 minutes.
- Postal – eight to 12 pages.
- Telephone – 15 to 20 minutes.
- Face to face – 30 minutes.

The study notes that

[w]hen surveys are longer than this, it can be hard to convince customers to complete them and levels of response can be low. Also, the quality of information that customers give declines dramatically if questionnaires are too long: customers may give little thought to their answers towards the end of the survey or simply not complete it. If customers perceive the service to be particularly important, the effect of questionnaire length is reduced and longer surveys are possible (HM Government, 2007: 22).

5

ANALYSING AND PRESENTING THE DATA

There are many standard texts on how to analyse and present data obtained from sources such as customer satisfaction surveys and the like. These issues are therefore not addressed here, but rather the focus is on a couple of issues crucial to ensuring the effective use of the data gathered.

5.1 COMPARING RESULTS

If a survey result comes back that shows that 76 per cent of customers say they are satisfied with the service, one obvious question that arises is how to know if that represents good or bad performance. Comparing the result against some other source (benchmarking) can help to answer this question. A number of benchmarking options are possible:

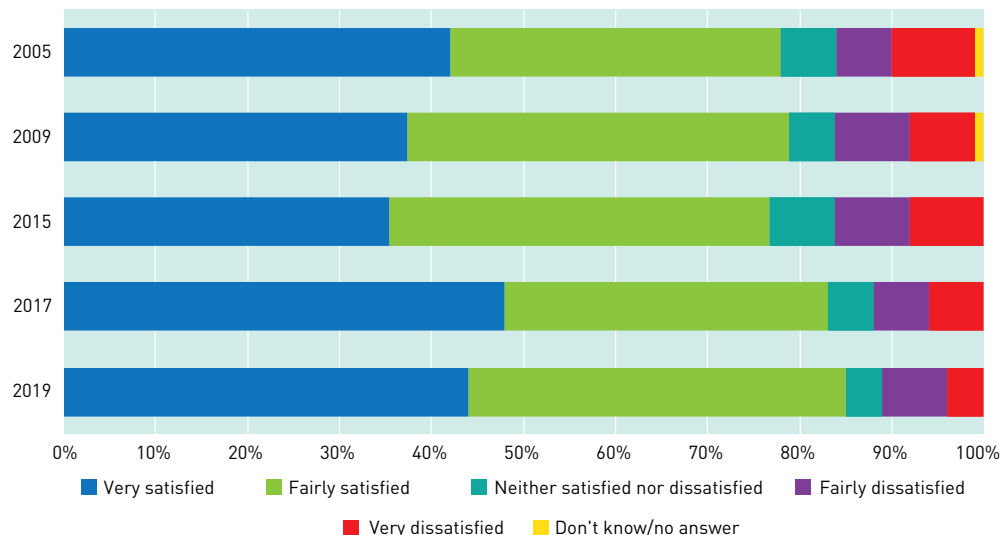
- Comparing over time with previous surveys about the same service.
- Comparing with other surveys about other similar services.
- Comparing across different customer groups.

5.1.1 Comparing over time

Comparison over time (from one month or year to the next for example) is by far the most commonly used benchmarking method. It can helpfully show how a service or aspect of a service is changing. In this case, it is important that the questions asked and the methods used to gather the data remain the same to ensure consistency in comparing like with like. Figure 5.1 illustrates changes in overall satisfaction levels for the Irish civil service resulting from various surveys carried out since 2005.

FIGURE 5.1 CHANGES IN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION LEVELS IN THE IRISH CIVIL SERVICE

Thinking of the most recent interaction you had with a civil service department or office - overall how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received?



Sometimes though, as services change, for example new means of delivery become available, it may be necessary to drop old questions, and develop new questions and measures. When this occurs, conducting regular surveys to enable tracking of changes is helpful.

5.1.2 Comparing across services/authorities

As Thijs (2011: 95) notes, '[b]enchmarking across services is of value only if the services are comparable. Different services can rarely be compared easily because the nature of the service and the type of customers that use it will have a strong bearing on customer perceptions. In essence, there is always a risk of "comparing apples with pears"'. Having said that, it is possible to compare similar services provided by different local authorities, though it is important to remember that local circumstances and local demographics vary considerably, and any comparison is subject to limitations.

Figure 5.2 gives an illustrative example of comparing customer satisfaction survey results across jurisdictions from Australia, where South Australia compares its results with New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland states, and also with the results of similar surveys in New Zealand and the UK to give an international dimension to the comparison.

FIGURE 5.2 COMPARISON ACROSS JURISDICTIONS

COMPARISON OF SA CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS TO OTHER JURISDICTIONS

Ratings for SA Government services have remained stable versus last year. NSW has seen a significant increase and UK has seen a significant decrease in satisfaction

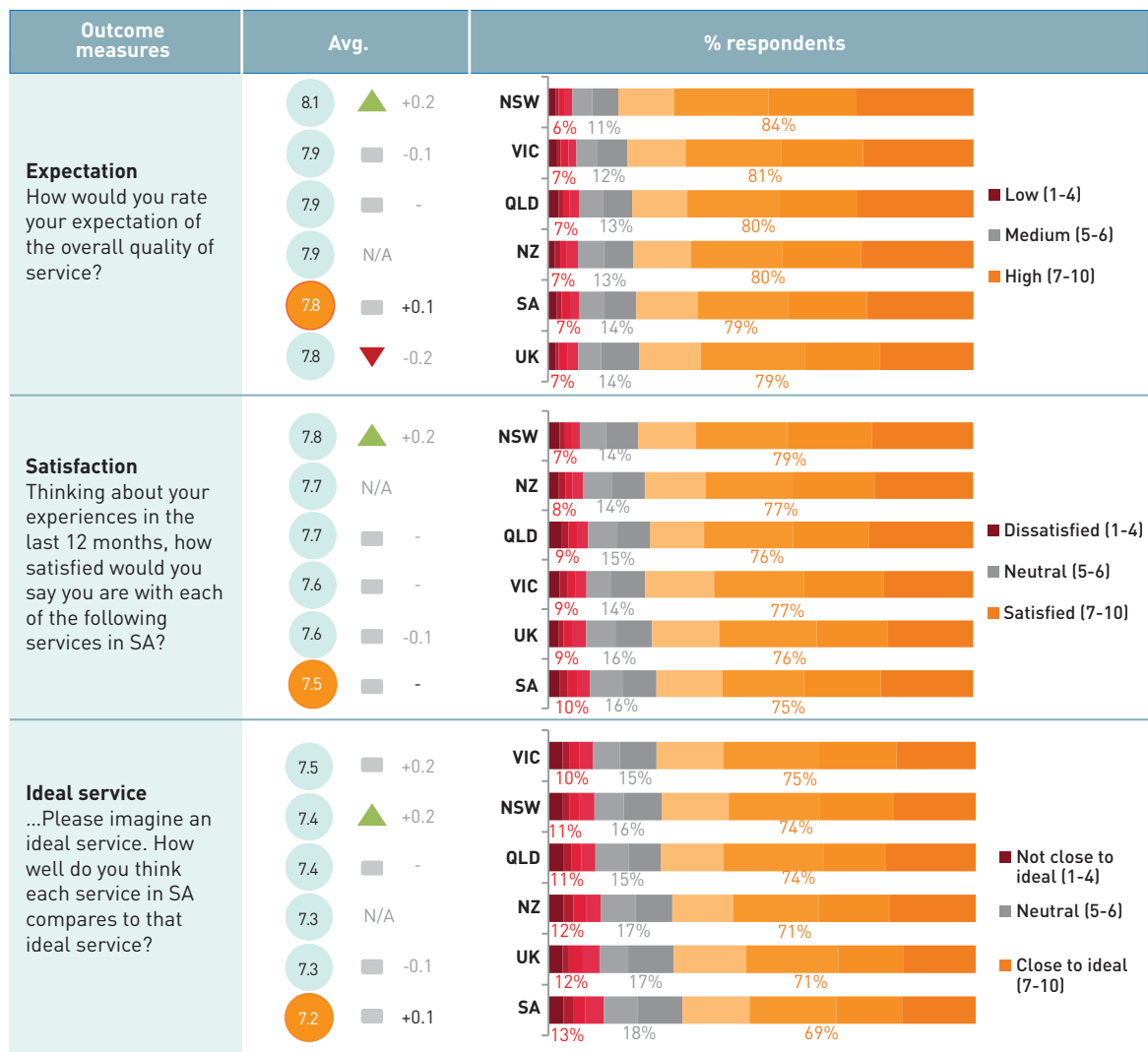
Figure 1.7: Satisfaction, expectation and ideal service across jurisdictions -Consumer

Compared to 2018, satisfaction and expectations have remained stable across jurisdictions with the exceptions of NSW and UK.

Compared to 2018, SA has improved its ranking by 1 spot when it comes to expectation but has retained its rankings for satisfaction and ideal service.

NSW has seen a statistically significant increase of 0.2 points in its satisfaction scores to 7.8. However, the expectation score has also increased statistically significantly to 8.1 – keeping the gap between expectation and satisfaction unchanged.

UK has seen a statistically significant decrease of 0.2 points in expectations to 7.8.



Note: Average satisfaction, expectation, comparison to ideal service and expectation gap scores are subject to rounding

- ▲ Legend: Statistically significant increase in avg. from 2018 (at 99% level of Confidence)
- No statistical significant change in avg. from 2018 (at 99% level of Confidence)
- ▼ Statistically significant decrease in avg. from 2018 (at 99% level of Confidence)

Source: Customer Service Commission, Customer Satisfaction Measurement Survey 2019 Report developed in conjunction with the NSW Customer Service Commissioner

Source: Government of South Australia, 2019

The most effective approach to the sharing of comparative survey information is to design a system which aims to give comparative data to local authority management and enable them to use the data to put their own management practices in context.

5.1.3 Comparing across different customer groups (customer segmentation)

Conducting customer segmentation can provide organisations with useful insights into customer behaviour and needs and provide a comparative dimension to the interpretation of results. As a study for the UK government shows (HM Government 2007: 29):

Knowing that the views, experiences and satisfaction levels of one sub-group of customers differ from those of another enables organisations to start formulating a targeted plan of action to improve their services. At a simple level, this analysis might be based on a breakdown of the results by information about customers such as their age, sex, service or channel usage, etc., which has either been collected in the survey or is available on the customer database used to select the survey sample.

Figure 5.3 provides an illustrative example of the segmentation of customer satisfaction scores from a number of councils in Victoria, Australia. Here, segmentation by age, gender and location is used to show variations in satisfaction levels. In this example looking at the level of satisfaction with local streets and footpaths for example, people living in metropolitan areas and young people have notably higher satisfaction levels than older people and those living in rural areas.

FIGURE 5.3 SEGMENTING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

The condition of local streets and footpaths in your area performance

2019 Streets and footpaths performance (index scores)

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Metropolitan	65 ▲	64	62	63	64	n/a	n/a
18-34	62 ▲	62	60	60	62	62	63
Regional Centres	61 ▲	59	57	58	58	n/a	n/a
Men	60 ▲	59	57	58	59	59	58
Interface	60	59	56	57	56	n/a	n/a
35-49	59	58	56	57	58	57	56
Overall	59	58	57	57	58	58	57
Women	58 ▼	58	56	56	57	56	56
65+	58	58	57	57	57	57	57
Small Rural	57 ▼	57	57	58	59	n/a	n/a
50-64	57 ▼	56	54	55	55	54	54
Large Rural	55 ▼	54	53	53	54	n/a	n/a

Q2. How has Council performed on 'The condition of local streets and footpaths in your area' over the last 12 months?
 Base: All respondents. Councils asked state-wide: 32

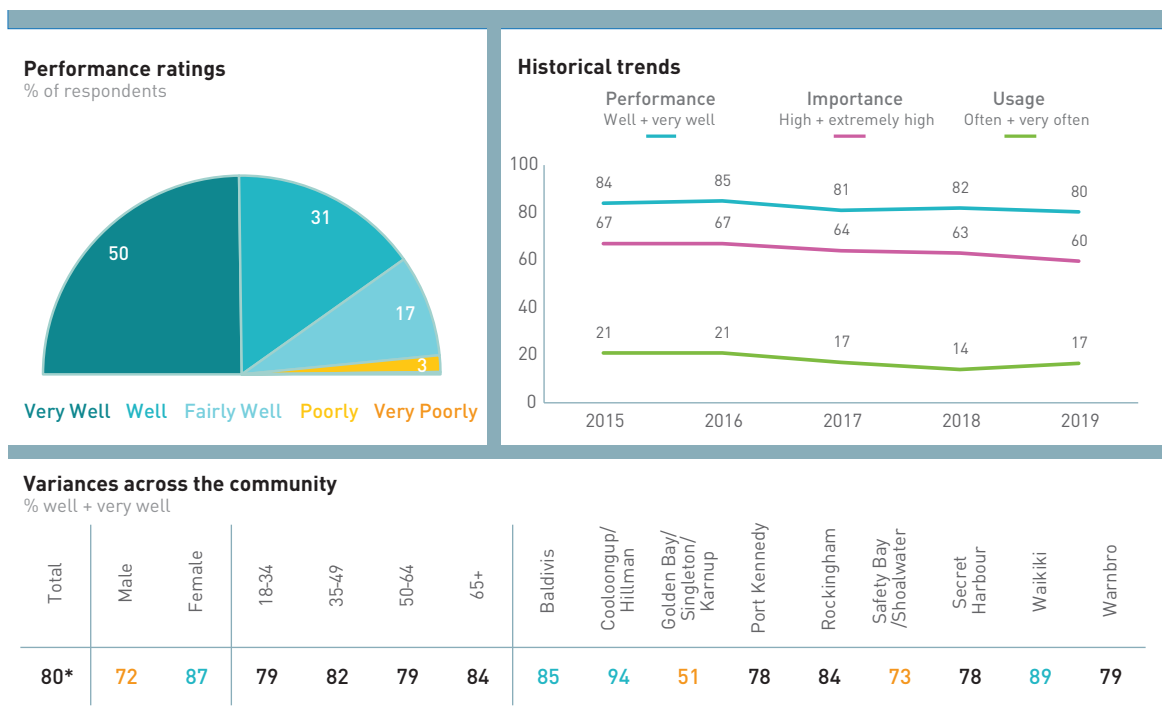
Source: JWS Research, 2019

Thijs (2011: 26) notes that customers can be segmented in a variety of ways:

At its simplest level, a segmentation may be based on service usage. For example, conducting customer feedback surveys on key service areas of their delivery such as individual and collective conciliation; advisory services; and training events. More sophisticated segments can be derived from administrative data or previous research. Some segmentations are based on demographic or attitudinal characteristics, or a combination of both. Exploratory qualitative research can also be used to tease out how different customers use a service. If an organisation has already identified customer segments, it is generally helpful if customer satisfaction measurement is compatible with these definitions.

Figure 5.4 shows how segmented data can be combined with performance ratings and time trend data to provide a simple but comprehensive overview for particular services. In this case, from the City of Rockingham in Australia, variances across the community with regard to satisfaction with library services can be seen. Segmentation is done by gender, age, and location.

FIGURE 5.4 SHOWING VARIANCES ACROSS THE COMMUNITY - LIBRARIES



Q. How often do you utilise the service or facility? Q. What importance do you place on the service or facility?
 Q. How well does the City deliver the service or facility? Base: All respondents, excludes no response (n = 465)
 * Where sub-totals add to ±1% of the parts, this is due to rounding errors to zero decimal places.

Source: City of Rockingham, 2020

5.2 LOOKING BEYOND SATISFACTION

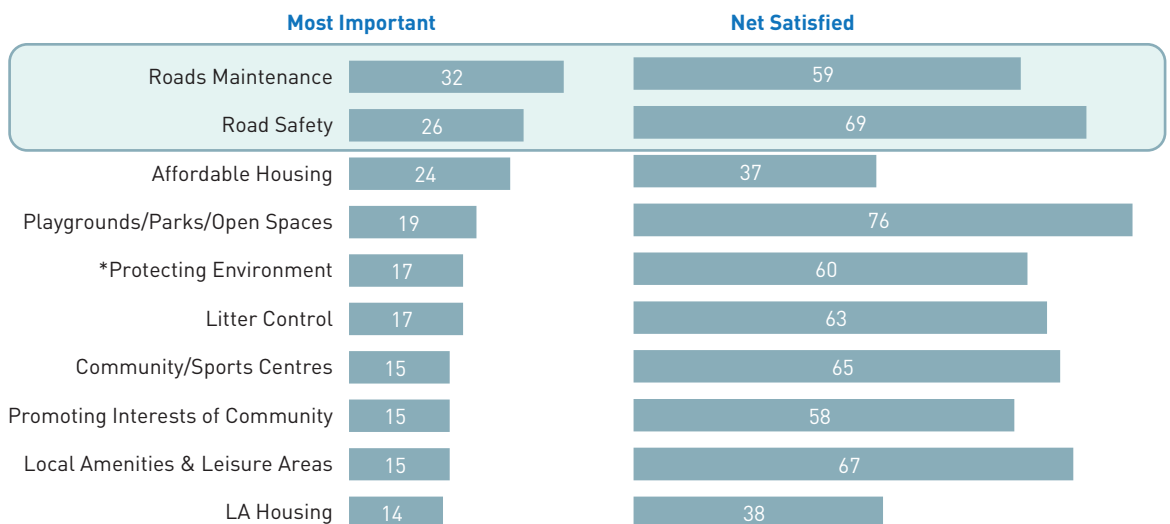
As noted earlier, just measuring customer satisfaction alone does not provide sufficient information on which to base action to improve services. Satisfaction levels tell an organisation how it is doing, but not why it is performing as it is. It is therefore important to understand the influence of different factors on the customer's experience and how they interact with each other: 'it is also critical to explore these factors in more depth, and to understand how they could be changed in order to improve customer service' (HM Government, 2007: 30). The role of key drivers, explored in section 4.5, is particularly important here.

Comparing satisfaction scores to the importance scores, for example, allows an organisation to determine its quality improvement priorities. Elements or services that are important to customers, and with which they are not satisfied, should be the first priority. Elements which citizens do not really see as very important, and where satisfaction is high could perhaps get less attention if resources are scarce. Figure 5.5 shows an illustrative example of comparing importance and satisfaction scores from the NOAC (2019) local authority satisfaction survey. Here it can be seen that affordable housing has a relatively high importance score, but scores less well than other services with regard to satisfaction.

FIGURE 5.5 COMPARING SATISFACTION AND IMPORTANCE DATA

ROAD MAINTENANCE (32%) AND SAFETY (26%) WERE IDENTIFIED AS THE MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES, AND THE MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS WERE SATISFIED WITH BOTH (59% & 69%) in 2018

Most Important Services and Satisfaction Levels – All Local Authorities



**10th Place in 2018*

Q.12 Looking at this list of services provided by [Local Council], please choose the most important services to you personally.

Base: All Respondents: 1,144

21 © 2019 Ipsos MRBI 18-098211-NOAC Local Authority Satisfaction Survey 2019

Source: NOAC, 2019

The Common Measurements Tool provides a useful example of how elements of different factors and drivers can be combined to improve understanding of customer satisfaction and highlight priorities for improvement. It incorporates five main questioning approaches, measuring

- client expectations,
- perceptions of the service experience,
- the level of importance attached to each of a number of service elements,
- the level of satisfaction with these elements, and
- priorities for service improvement.

Figure 5.2 above provides an illustrative example where expectations, satisfaction, and comparison to the ideal are tracked, and differences between them can be factored into the analysis of where and how improvement is most needed.

6

CONCLUSIONS

Definition of a customer

In reviewing the literature on measuring customer satisfaction, one point that emerged strongly is the importance of distinguishing between measuring customer satisfaction and measuring public or citizen satisfaction. Based on the literature, in defining the 'customer', a working definition for the study emerged:

An individual who has recent experience as a user of products or services of local authorities.

This addresses the issue that the more recent the experience, the more likely it is that the judgement about the level of satisfaction will be based on actual experience rather than pre-existing dispositions and biases. 'Recent' in this context means within a 12-month period.

Data collection methods

For local authorities or national agencies wishing to measure customer satisfaction in local government, a range of methods of data collection have been identified. Apart from surveys, discussed separately, the main data sources and methods that can be used are

- *administrative data* held by local authorities. This is a rich source of information on aspects of customer satisfaction, such as the time taken to process various activities, or waiting times on calls;
- *complaints schemes*. These can be a valuable source of customer feedback on the level of satisfaction with aspects of service quality, as can keeping a record of compliments received;
- *front line staff*. These members of staff are well placed to provide insights into customer satisfaction with the service provided. By its nature, such information is normally qualitative in nature rather than providing specific measures of customer satisfaction;
- *citizen/customer panels*. These can be used to elicit the views of service users on a range of issues, including satisfaction;
- *focus groups*. These provide an opportunity for in-depth qualitative interviews to be conducted with groups of service users; and
- *mystery shopping*. This involves putting a trained person in contact with an organisation to evaluate the quality of service provided.

Each method has different strengths and limitations. A combination of methods often provides a more rounded perspective on customer satisfaction.

Surveys

Surveys are the most common and widespread means of developing measures of customer satisfaction. A driving force for this study was the fact that NOAC has indicated its plan to pass the task of carrying out customer satisfaction surveys after 2020 to the LGMA, and the consequent need for the LGMA to develop appropriate means and procedures for the conduct of this work.

Some limitations with the customer satisfaction surveys conducted for NOAC up to now have been highlighted by this study. In particular, the surveys to date could more accurately be described as public satisfaction surveys than customer satisfaction surveys, given (a) the fact interviewees were asked had they personally made contact with their local council for any reason in the past five years rather than more recently, and (b) that only around one-third of respondents indicated they had personally made contact in the past five years. It is common in customer satisfaction surveys on public services to ask if there had been contact within the last 12 months.

More generally, a number of issues to be borne in mind when conducting customer satisfaction surveys have been highlighted by this study:


- In terms of measuring overall satisfaction, multi-item scales generally perform better than single-item scales. A good example is the three-item scale used in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI).
- A common, core set of questions provides the basis for the development of comparative perspectives on satisfaction. The Common Measurements Tool was highlighted as a tool specifically designed for use by public service organisations. It is built around five key elements: client expectations; perceptions of the service experience; satisfaction levels; levels of importance; and priorities for service improvements.
- Measuring drivers of satisfaction is important in satisfaction surveys. While it is important to know how satisfied customers are, it is also vital to understand why. Customer satisfaction driver analysis aims to uncover the factors that influence satisfaction.
- With regard to measuring expectations, it is important to know whether customer expectations are being met, and if there is a gap, the scale of that gap.

A wide range of means of collecting survey data are available, including face-to-face, postal, telephone and web surveys. Each has strengths and limitations and the choice of which to use depends on the context and purpose of the survey.

Analysing and presenting the data

A number of benchmarking options are possible when presenting data from customer satisfaction surveys:

- Comparing over time with previous surveys about the same service.
- Comparing with other surveys across local authorities about other similar services.
- Comparing across different customer groups.



Again, there are strengths and limitations associated with each approach. In particular, if comparing across authorities, it is important to ensure as far as possible that similar demographic and service profiles exist. For example, an authority with a largely younger age profile and urban population is likely to be very different from a more rural authority with a more elderly age profile.

In presenting the data, satisfaction levels tell an organisation how it is doing, but not why it is performing as it is. It is therefore important to understand the influence of different factors on the customer's experience and how they interact with each other. As well as measuring satisfaction, it is important to also measure other factors and drivers, particularly customer expectations, perceptions of the service experience compared to the ideal, and the level of importance attached to each of the service elements assessed.

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