

**ANALYSIS OF REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
OMNIBUS SURVEY ATTITUDINAL RESEARCH**

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**Final Report**

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## CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Acknowledgements	4
Background	5 - 6
What does the public think of public services?	7 - 25
Levels of governance - evidence from the surveys	26 - 35
Local government, centralisation or arms-length?	36 - 38
Comparisons with qualitative findings	39 - 41
Appendix 1: Understanding satisfaction	42 - 53
Appendix 2: Technical annex	54 - 55

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A representative sample of some 1,200 people were interviewed in three Omnibus surveys conducted in September 2002, February 2003, and April 2003 to assess the views and experiences of public services in Northern Ireland.
- There are mixed results on how satisfied the public are with public services: 45% satisfied or very satisfied with public services in Northern Ireland; 20% either not satisfied or not at all satisfied; 34% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- There is considerable room for quality improvement in health and social services, education, roads and housing respectively.
- Things that needed to be improved are: quality of service; who to complain to when things go wrong; value for money; and easy access to services, respectively.
- ‘Quality’ for users equates to services delivered on time, in an efficient way, which meet their needs and are accessible.
- Preferred access to public services & information: one phone number; one-stop-shop and one website, respectively.
- Equality Issues: older people and the disabled are perceived as less well treated in the provision of public services.
- People do not feel engaged by public service providers.
- There is a lack of confidence in complaining about public services.
- People have a strong sense of local identity.
- Local councillors are a key access point for help/advice on public services generally.
- Councils are aware of local needs, accountable to the electorate, and an important forum for local service provision.
- Non-departmental public bodies currently provide services most in need of improvement.
- There is a general lack of awareness of quangos. This may have implications for user accountability - if people are unaware of their role, can they be properly accountable to users of their services?
- If quangos are to be retained, members should be elected not selected.
- There is support for the involvement of voluntary & community and private sectors in service provision, planning services and policy development.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors wish to acknowledge the significant help, guidance and constructive comments provided by Dr. Debbie Donnelly, Tony O'Brien and Jane Corderoy from the Review of Public Administration Team. They also benefited from a joint seminar held with Research and Evaluation Services (RES) and Independent Research Solutions (IRS) which considered the findings of both qualitative and quantitative data on public attitudes. The views expressed in this paper, however, remain those of the authors.

## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Review of Public Administration Team is interested in finding out the public's views and experiences of public services in Northern Ireland. As a result, they commissioned three sets of questions in the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey in September 2002, February 2003 and April 2003.

1.2 The **overall aim** of this research is:

- To carry out independent analytical work on the results of these surveys and provide an explanatory framework for the results.

1.3 More specifically the objectives of the research are:

- i. To provide a detailed analysis of attitudinal data obtained from three sweeps of the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey on people's experiences and views on public services in Northern Ireland.
- ii. To provide a clear explanatory framework for the analysis.
- iii. To provide clearly written interim and final reports including appropriate tables and diagrams within the agreed costs and timetable.
- iv. To identify gaps in the attitudinal research already commissioned and make suggestions for further topics to be explored in future surveys

1.4 This report will consider both the existing analyses of the Omnibus data, reported by Tony O'Brien<sup>1</sup> and further exploration of the data. It will locate the findings within a two part **explanatory framework** as follows:

- A general overview of people's views on public services in Northern Ireland and, as a result, what the data tell us about the need for public administration reform.
- A more detailed assessment of how providers at 3 levels - local government, non-departmental public bodies and government departments, meet the challenges set out in the Review of Public Administration, e.g. democratic accountability, community responsiveness, quality of service and subsidiarity.

The paper concludes by comparing the quantitative findings from the Omnibus survey data with a parallel (but separate) qualitative project which gathered the views of the public via focus groups.

1.5 The premise for this approach to analysing the data and locating it within the proposed framework is that ultimately the Review must focus on how structural arrangements can be put in place which will lead to service improvements. Importantly, it highlights the fact that the Review of Public Administration is a means to an end. A concentration on structural reconfiguration (which is of acute interest to service providers) is important only to the extent that it ultimately produces better services to the public. In

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<sup>1</sup> This is available on the Review of Public Administration website: [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk).

short, therefore, we have approached this work with two key questions in mind:

- What does the public think of public services provision?
- What does this tell us about how providers currently meet the values and priorities for change set out in the Review?

1.6 The Omnibus data are presented here in response to these two key questions. The first section re-presents Tony O'Brien's analyses in a (slightly) different format and takes his work further with additional independent analytical research. It then highlights the implications of the findings for the Review of Public Administration. The second section looks for survey evidence which examines public service provision at 3 levels:

- Local government;
- Non- departmental public bodies; and
- Central government departments/agencies.

Therein the data are examined to assess the public's perceptions of services delivered by these bodies and the implications of their views for any future changes to the system of public administration in Northern Ireland.

## 2. WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC THINK OF PUBLIC SERVICES?

2.1 The most important starting point in addressing this question is to establish how satisfied the public are with public services. Two questions were posed to elicit information here: satisfaction with public services in Northern Ireland generally; and, satisfaction with public services within own areas.

2.2 **Satisfaction with public services in Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>**: the results show that 45% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with public services in Northern Ireland; 20% stated they were either not satisfied or not at all satisfied with public services; and 34% reported they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (see figure 1).

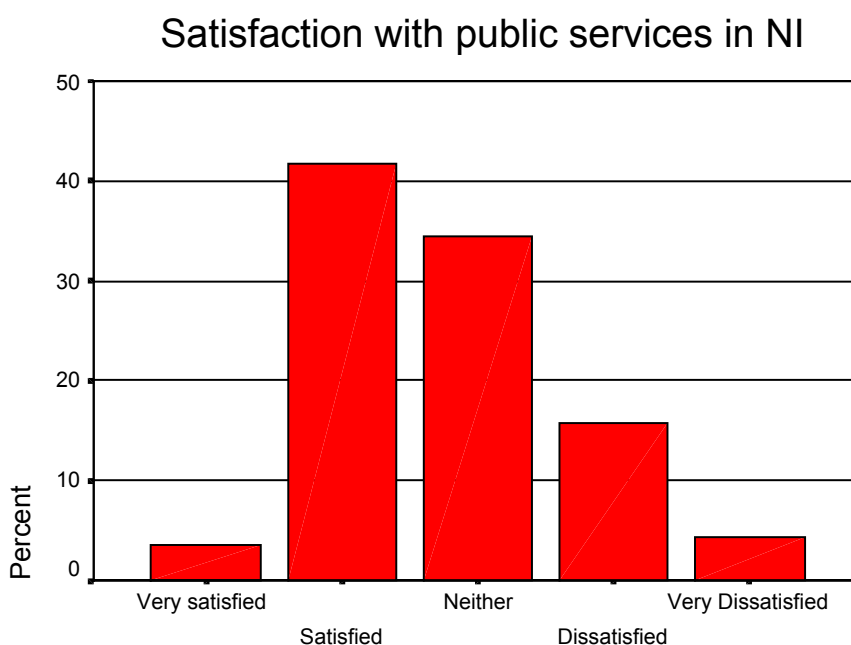


Figure 1

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<sup>2</sup> N= 1196 (excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know' responses).

- 2.3 One interesting observation on these findings, apart from the polar positions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, is the high percentage of respondents who were ambivalent. How can the finding that 34% of those surveyed were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied be interpreted? There is some disagreement in the survey literature about the merits of including a middle alternative<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand it may encourage a non-committal response, on the other it allows for an additional gradation of opinion. That said, the middle ground alternative might be less neutral than it appears. 'Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' is not the same as expressing no opinion or sitting on the fence. Rather, it can be a balanced expression of both good and bad experiences of public services or the fact that an overall judgement has not been reached (this is discussed further in appendix 1)
- 2.4 **Satisfaction with public services in own areas**<sup>4</sup>: the results show that 49% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with public services in their own areas; 23% stated they were either not satisfied or not at all satisfied with public services; and 28% reported they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (see figure 2).



Figure 2

<sup>3</sup> C. Robson (1993 - *Real World Research*: Blackwell) argues that typically 20% of respondents may use the middle category, but it appears that its inclusion or exclusions does not affect the relative proportions of those actually expressing opinions.

<sup>4</sup> N= 1196 (excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know' responses).

2.5 We were interested to explore further whether the pattern of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with public services was geographical distinctive. In other words, did satisfaction/dissatisfaction vary across Northern Ireland? We therefore cross-tabulated<sup>5</sup> the satisfaction variable with the area in which the respondent lived (collapsed into Belfast City Council, East and West of the Province<sup>6</sup>). The results are set out in table 1:

Area	Satisfaction		
	Satisfied <sup>7</sup> %	Neither %	Dissatisfied <sup>8</sup> %
Belfast	14	18	20
East	50	50	43
West	36	32	37
Total N = 1195	588	335	272

The results show a weak relationship between satisfaction levels with public services and the area in which the respondents live. Hence, the pattern of satisfaction and dissatisfaction is not geographically specific<sup>9</sup> or doesn't vary across Northern Ireland.

2.6 Interestingly, however, O'Brien reports a significant difference in levels of satisfaction with public services in Northern Ireland across socio-economic groups. Those in non-manual occupations were significantly more likely to be satisfied with public services than respondents in manual/unskilled jobs. No such differences were reported however for satisfaction with local services in their own areas<sup>10</sup> (we return to this point in section 2.33).

2.7 Measuring satisfaction with public services in this way is a complex process for a number of reasons. In the first place, it isn't clear precisely what 'satisfaction' means when posed as a question to survey respondents. Recent research published by the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) shows that people tend to be satisfied when their perceptions of the service they receive match their expectations<sup>11</sup>. Expectations, according to the PIU, are formed by many factors including previous experience, word of mouth, service reputation, the media, communications by providers and, crucially, the needs and characteristics of the service user.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of cross-tabulations see appendix 2: Technical Annex.

<sup>6</sup> Belfast: Belfast City Council;

East: Antrim, Ards, Ballymena, Banbridge, Carrick, Castlereagh, Craigavon, Down, Larne, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down;

West: Armagh, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Cookstown, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Limavady, Derry, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry & Mourne, Omagh, Strabane.

<sup>7</sup> Category includes 'satisfied' and 'very satisfied'.

<sup>8</sup> Category includes 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'.

<sup>9</sup>  $\chi^2 = 7.10$ ; Cramer's V = .055;  $p > .05$ .

<sup>10</sup> See Tony O'Brien *Research Bulletin 1* September Omnibus Survey: [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk).

<sup>11</sup> 'Satisfaction with Public Services: A Discussion Paper' (2001). Performance and Innovation Unit. London: Cabinet Office.

- 2.8 Secondly, asking 'how satisfied one is with public services in Northern Ireland' is a broadly cast question. What is the likely conception of 'public services' among respondents, and is it possible to elicit a generic response on satisfaction, given the diverse range of functions which comprise the public sector? For example, survey evidence (discussed later in this paper), shows that almost half the respondents were unaware of non-departmental public bodies, yet they currently account for the bulk of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. In other words, can respondents provide an informed opinion on satisfaction with public services if they are unaware of the scope and make-up of the public sector? It is of course reasonable to suggest that people can have valid views on public services without understanding their delivery structures. This reinforces the point that the public has little interest in who provides, rather they are concerned with what is provided.
- 2.9 Thirdly, individual sectors (e.g. local government, agencies, and health and social services) can point to very high levels of customer satisfaction which would seem at odds with the moderate rates reported here. Locally, for example, research carried out by the health and social services councils shows high levels of satisfaction (between 70 - 90%) with family doctors, hospitals and the health service in general, although the research is rather dated<sup>12</sup>. Nationally (Great Britain) MORI cites net satisfaction rates of 85% with General Practitioners' services, 83% with primary schools, 82% with refuse services and 68% with hospitals<sup>13</sup>. It is worth noting here just how difficult it is to access data on public satisfaction with services in Northern Ireland. Despite some 32 organisations reporting involvement in customer satisfaction surveys, according to research undertaken by the Chief Executives' Forum, many are reluctant to disseminate this information and wish to retain it for internal managerial purposes only<sup>14</sup>.
- 2.10 Given the targeted nature of respondents in sectoral surveys, it may be the case that the broadly couched Omnibus question is exploring people's trust or confidence in services provided by the public sector, rather than necessarily their experience of using them. Moreover, how does the question 'how satisfied are you with public services in Northern Ireland' differentiate between very positive experiences of one public service, for example, and very negative experiences of another? In other words, is there a trade-off between the positive and negative individual experiences, accounting for the high percentage responding as 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'? We discuss the complexities of measuring satisfaction further in Appendix 1.
- 2.11 **Services most in need of improvement:** the obvious corollary to the above questions is which public services do people think are most in need of improvement. In rank order these were health and social services (42%), education (20%), roads (10%) and housing (9%) (see table 2). O'Brien reports

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<sup>12</sup> Research carried out in October 1996 - source RPA Team 'Summary of Health & Social Services Councils' Attitudinal Research'.

<sup>13</sup> MORI and Office of Public Services Reform (2002): 'Public Service Reform - Measuring and Understanding Customer Satisfaction'.

<sup>14</sup> Chief Executives' Forum (2001) 'The Use of Customer Satisfaction Surveys in the Northern Ireland Public Sector'.

differences across socio-economic groups in response to these priorities. Non-manual respondents stated that education was the service most in need of improvement compared with those working in other occupations<sup>15</sup>.

**TABLE 2: PUBLIC SERVICES MOST IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Ranked Choice <sup>16</sup>	Number
Health & Social Services	42%	512
Education	20%	239
Roads	10%	128
Housing	9%	110
Employment Services	7%	84
Waste Management	4%	45
Environmental Management	2%	31
Planning	2%	25
Leisure Services	2%	21
Water	1%	15
Tourism	1%	6
Total	100%	1218

- 2.12 Whilst this response shows very strong support for improving health & social services and education respectively, it is interesting to note that these functions currently receive the largest share of public funds. 'Health and social services' as a listed function in the survey covers a wide range of functions and hence respondents may not have been discriminating in their assessment. Equally, there can be confusion over the terms 'social services' and 'social security'. The latter does not appear on the survey list yet, arguably, among lower income groups could be in need of improvement.
- 2.13 In the 2002-03 expenditure plans, for example, health, social services and public safety were allocated 39.6% of the overall budget (£6.4 billion), education 22%, followed by employment and learning (9.7%), regional development, which includes roads, (8.4%), and social development, which includes housing, (7%)<sup>17</sup>. Hence, there is considerable alignment between services considered 'most in need of improvement' and Programme for Government spending priorities. It is also important to note that the Review of Public Administration covers some 80% of expenditure on devolved services<sup>18</sup>.
- 2.14 **Things which need to improve about public services:** having identified which services are most in need of improvement, respondents were asked which particular aspects of public services needed to be improved. Again, in rank order the following were seen as most in need of improvements: quality of service (29%); knowing who to complain to if things go wrong (18%); value for money (12%); and easy access to services (11%) - see table 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Tony O'Brien *Research Bulletin 3* April Omnibus Survey: [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk)

<sup>16</sup> Table 2 excludes 'other', don't know' and 'refusal'.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Public Expenditure Plans 2002-03. Department of Finance and Personnel.

<sup>18</sup> *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland* (2003) Consultation Document: 8.

**TABLE 3: NEED TO BE IMPROVED ABOUT PUBLIC SERVICES**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Ranked Choice <sup>19</sup>	Number
Quality of service	29%	343
Who to complain to when something goes wrong	18%	207
Value for money	12%	140
Easy access to services	11%	124
Speed of response from public bodies	9%	105
Different public services co-ordinating with each other	6%	72
Other	15%	177
Total	100%	1168

2.15 **Quality of public services:** following up on the specific issue of ‘quality’ of public services, views were sought as to the extent to which quality of public services had improved or deteriorated over the last 5 years. Some 34% felt the quality of public services had improved; 34% said quality was unchanged; and 31% claimed the quality of public services had deteriorated or greatly deteriorated (see figure 3). Much like 'satisfaction' though, what constitutes 'quality' is an amorphous concept which is unpacked in subsequent questions.

**Quality Improvement in last 5 years**

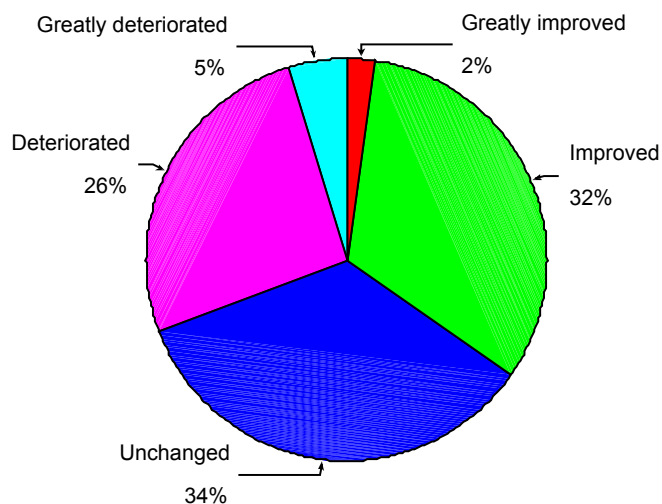


Figure 3

2.16 **Important factors when using public services:** respondents were asked the most important factors for them in using a public service. In rank order they

<sup>19</sup> Table 3 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

stated that: services are delivered on time (34%); services are delivered as efficiently as possible (19%); services are delivered which meet their needs (17%); and that you can access services when you need to (14%) (see table 4). The work cited earlier by the Performance and Innovation Unit which stressed the importance of services meeting user needs is therefore rather surprising - ranked third here.

**TABLE 4: MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR SERVICE USERS**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Ranked Choice <sup>20</sup>	Number
Services delivered on time	34%	401
Services delivered as efficiently as possible	19%	233
Services delivered meet your needs	17%	198
You can access the services you need	14%	168
Those responsible for delivery are held to account	7%	87
One point of contact for information on a range of services	4%	42
The people who deliver public services are polite	3%	40
Delivered from a local office	2%	24
Total	100%	1193

- 2.17 **Access to public services:** following up on the issue of ‘access’ identified above, people were asked to express their preferred method, if they had a choice, of accessing public services. In rank order, respondents’ first preference was to have one telephone number to access services and information about services (51%); one physical location or one-stop-shop (29%); and one website as the third preference (20%) (see table 5).

**TABLE 5: ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES & INFORMATION**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Rank Choice <sup>21</sup>	Number
One Phone Number	51%	611
One-stop-shop	29%	353
One website	20%	242
Total	100%	1206

- 2.18 **Contacting providers of public services:** as a way of exploring further the issue of ‘access’, respondents were asked about the most likely method used to contact a provider of public services. In rank order, the telephone was the most popular choice (69%); by letter (17%); in person (8%); and by email (4%) (see table 6). Both these results (access to services and contacting providers) illustrate the overwhelming support for the telephone, despite the emergence of other e-government initiatives.

**TABLE 6: CONTACTING PUBLIC SERVICES PROVIDERS**

<sup>20</sup> Table 4 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

<sup>21</sup> Table 5 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

	Ranked choice <sup>22</sup>	Number
By telephone	69%	831
By letter	17%	197
In person	8%	100
Email	4%	44
Via elected representative	1%	14
Website	1%	13
Total	100%	1199

- 2.19 **Equality issues:** respondents were asked if there were any groups in society which were treated less well in the provision of public services. Older people ranked highest with 37%; followed by people with disabilities (16%); people on low incomes (6%); and people of different racial groups (5%) (see table 7). The level of perception/reality that older people are less well treated, relative to other section 75 groups, is notable and should prompt public services to re-examine existing and new service provision.

**TABLE 7: GROUPS TREATED LESS WELL IN PUBLIC SERVICES**

	Ranked choice <sup>23</sup>	Number
Older people	37%	382
People with disabilities	16%	170
People on low incomes	6%	62
Different racial groups	5%	54
Children & young people	4%	38
Rural communities	4%	37
People with particular religious beliefs	3%	30
Different sexual orientation	1%	13
People with dependants	1%	7
Married people	<1%	4
People of particular political opinion	<1%	3
Men or women	<1%	3
Other	23%	235
Total	100%	1038

- 2.20 **Engagement and participation of the public<sup>24</sup>:** a number of themes were explored under this general heading. First, does the public have enough say in how public services are provided in their area? Most respondents (77%) stated they did not have enough say in terms of public service provision in their area; whilst 23% argued they did have enough say in how public services were provided (see figure 4).

<sup>22</sup> Table 6 excludes 'refusal', 'don't know' and 'other'.

<sup>23</sup> Table 7 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

<sup>24</sup> Figure 4 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

## Enough say in public provision in your area?

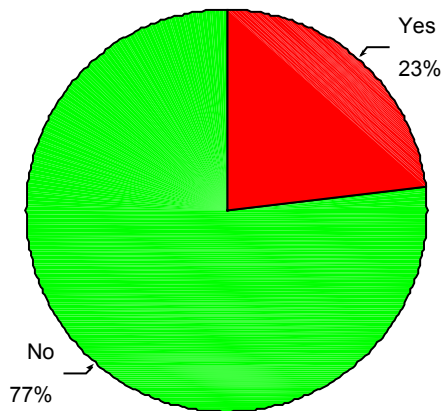


Figure 4

2.21 To explore engagement and participation of the public further, we were interested to see whether there was an association between consumer involvement and satisfaction with public services. Cross-tabulating these variables produces the following results (table 8).

		Table 8: Engagement and Satisfaction (local services)		
		Satisfaction		
Enough say in provision		Satisfied <sup>25</sup> %	Neither %	Dissatisfied <sup>26</sup> %
		Yes	35	15
	No	65	85	92
Total N = 1157		561	328	268

2.22 The results show a weak to moderate association between the variables which is likely to hold in the population (as opposed to the sample)<sup>27</sup>. For example, 92% of those who were dissatisfied with public services in their area felt they did not have enough say in how services were provided, not an unexpected *a priori* assumption. On the other hand, 65% of respondents who were satisfied with public services in their area also felt that they did not have enough say. There is a weak relationship between engagement in, and satisfaction with, public services at the local level. In other words, engagement and participation have only a limited impact on satisfaction with public services.

<sup>25</sup> Category includes 'satisfied' and 'very satisfied'.

<sup>26</sup> Category includes 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'.

<sup>27</sup>  $\chi^2 = 91.74$ ; Cramer's V = 0.28;  $p < .001$

2.23 This relationship was tested further by examining the variables at Northern Ireland-wide level (as opposed to 'within your area'). The results are set out in table 9.

		Satisfaction		
		Satisfied <sup>28</sup> %	Neither %	Dissatisfied <sup>29</sup> %
Enough say in provision	Yes	37	13	8
	No	63	87	92
Total N = 1157		519	404	234

The results suggest a stronger (although still moderate) association between the variables which is likely to apply in the overall population<sup>30</sup>. Although 92% of those dissatisfied with public services in Northern Ireland also claimed not enough engagement in provision, it should also be noted that 63% of those who were satisfied with services claimed not to have enough say. In other words (as with local services) engagement and participation have a limited impact on satisfaction with public services.

2.24 When respondents expressed a view to public bodies, they were asked to what extent these views were listened to. Some 66% of respondents felt their views were listened to only to a limited extent or not at all; 28% felt that their views

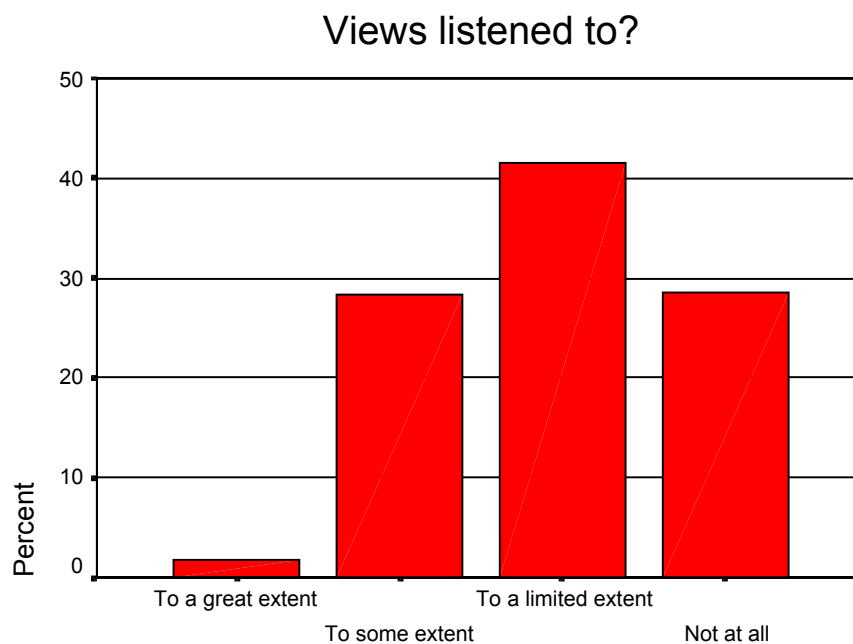


Figure 5

were listened to some extent or to a great extent (see figure 5).

<sup>28</sup> Category includes 'satisfied' and 'very satisfied'.

<sup>29</sup> Category includes 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'.

<sup>30</sup>  $\chi^2 = 108.13$ ; Cramer's V = 0.31;  $p < .001$

- 2.25 Expanding on the theme of 'being listened to' by public bodies, we were interested in exploring whether the receptivity of organisations to consumer views was linked to quality improvements in services. Hence we examined the relationship between these variables. This was prompted by the Audit Commission's research which considered the core influences on 'levels of trust in the public sector'<sup>31</sup>. It has been argued that trust is at the heart of the relationship between citizens and government and is particularly important in relation to services which influence life and liberty - health and policing, but also services such as social services and education<sup>32</sup>.
- 2.26 The Audit Commission identified six core influences on levels of trust: staff treat people well; public bodies learn from mistakes; and keep their promises; friends and family say positive things about providers; the quality of the leaders and managers is high; and organisations listen to people's views. Hence, the fact that two-thirds of our respondents felt their views were listened to 'to a limited extent' or 'not at all', is perhaps a rather negative influence on trust. But is 'being listened to' linked to quality improvement?

Table 10: Quality and views listened to

		Satisfaction		
		Listened to <sup>33</sup>	Limited %	Not listened to %
Quality	Improved	52	32	20
	Unchanged	31	38	33
	Deteriorated	17	30	47
Total N = 1146		339	335	326

- 2.27 The results (table 10) suggest a weak association between quality improvements and 'views being listened to' which is likely to apply in the overall population<sup>34</sup>. Hence, although 80% of respondents who felt their views 'had not been listened to' claimed services had deteriorated or remained unchanged as one might expect, a high 48% of those whose views had been received, also registered a similar deterioration or no change in service quality.
- 2.28 Finally, people were asked how well informed they felt about what public services were doing. More than one third (35%) stated that public services kept them well informed or very well informed about what they were doing. On the other hand, 51% of respondents felt that public services did not keep them well (or not at all well) informed about what they were doing (see figure 6).

<sup>31</sup> 'Trust in the Public Sector' (2003). The Audit Commission.

<sup>32</sup> 'Creating Public Value: An analytical framework for public service reform' (2002). Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office.

<sup>33</sup> Category includes listened to 'to a great extent' and 'to some extent'.

<sup>34</sup>  $\chi^2 = 102.08$ ; Cramer's V = 0.21;  $p < .001$

## How well informed by public services?

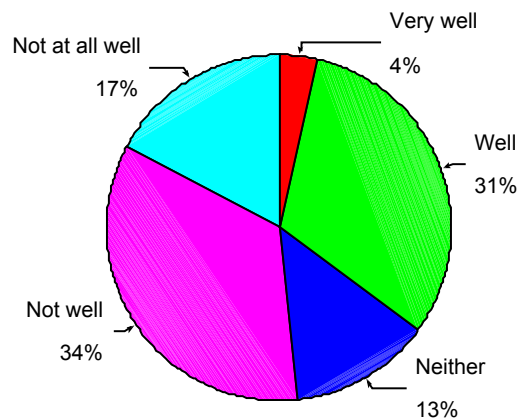


Figure 6

2.29 To explore this further, the relationship between being 'kept informed by public services' about their actions/intentions and the extent to which the 'quality of public services had improved or deteriorated' was examined. In other words, we were interested to examine whether there was an association between 'information provided' and 'quality'. In part, our interest in this was prompted by the Audit Commission research which argued that the public perception of the quality of services is affected by:

- The quality of information provided about them and in particular the availability of independent information evaluating their performance; and
- The direct contact experienced by members of the public, or reported by their friends and family<sup>35</sup>.

2.30 The results are shown in table 11 and suggest a weak association between these two variables which is likely to hold in the population generally<sup>36</sup>. As one might expect, 40% of those who did not feel well informed also suggested the quality of public services had deteriorated. But equally, 20% of those who felt well informed also claimed quality had deteriorated. Hence the data suggest that there is limited association between quality improvement and information provided. In other words, providing information on public services has a limited impact on improving quality.

<sup>35</sup> 'Trust in the Public Sector' (2003). The Audit Commission.

<sup>36</sup>  $\chi^2 = 68.9$ ; Cramer's V = 0.17;  $p < .001$

Table 11: Quality and being kept informed

		Being kept informed		
		Well informed <sup>37</sup> %	Neither %	Not well informed <sup>38</sup> %
Quality	Improved	48	30	27
	Unchanged	32	44	33
	Deteriorated	20	26	40
Total N = 1187		413	157	617

2.31 **Complaints about public services:** a number of questions were posed around the theme of making complaints about public services. Outlining a scenario in which a contractor had dug up your street to lay pipes and left a mess, respondents were asked if they complained how confident were they that the complaint would be dealt with satisfactorily. Some 36% were confident or very confident it would be dealt with satisfactorily; 61% were not confident or not at all confident that a complaint would be dealt with to their satisfaction (see figure 7). Whilst not too surprising (the RES focus group work found people perceive that complaints are 'ignored or buried'), one possible source of confusion in this question is that the scenario contractor could have been from the private sector, although one suspects public opinion may have been the same regardless!

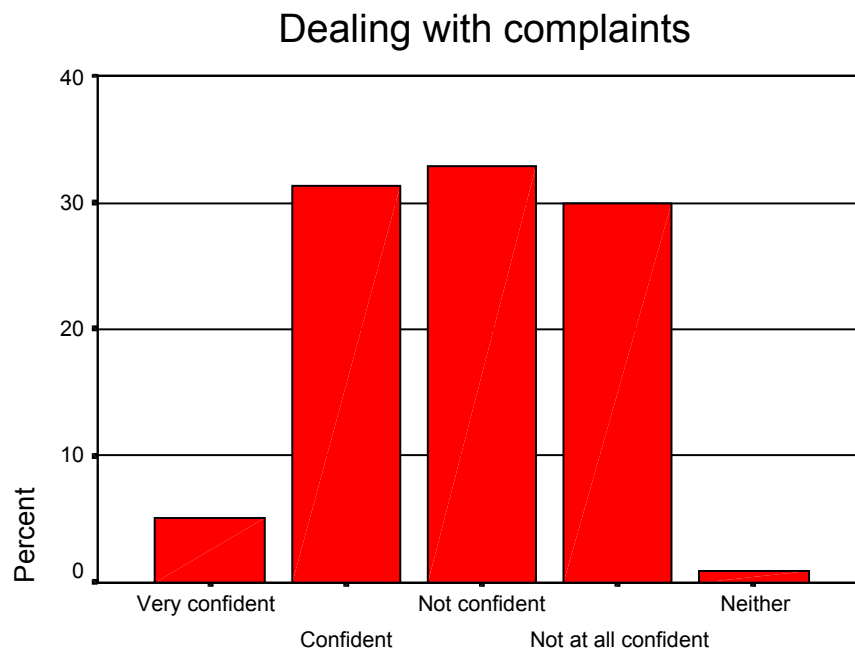


Figure 7

<sup>37</sup> Category includes 'very well' and 'well informed'.

<sup>38</sup> Category includes 'not well informed' and 'not at all well informed'.

2.32 Respondents were then probed about their actual experience of complaining to public service providers. Hence, they were asked if they had ever made a complaint about public services. Some 22% had made a complaint about public services at some time (see figure 8). Intuitively, this does not seem particularly high, given the levels of dissatisfaction with public services (20%) registered above (see figure 1). On the other hand, it may well be the case that people are deterred from complaining due to lack of awareness or the complexities of the complaints process. O'Brien reports a significant difference across socio-economic groups in making complaints. Those working in non-manual occupations were more likely to have made a complaint than those working in other occupations<sup>39</sup>.

### Ever complained about public services?

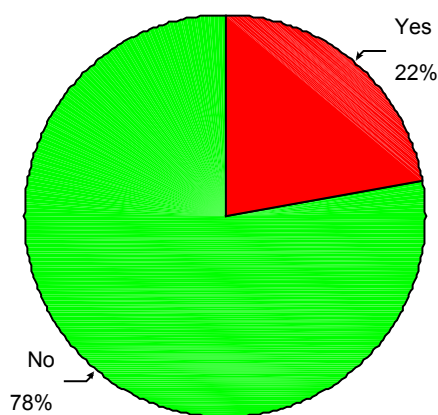


Figure 8

2.33 Speculatively, it could be suggested that those from non-manual backgrounds, given their occupations, are more likely to grapple with bureaucracies in an effort to have their complaints addressed. Those from non-manual occupations could simply be resigned in the belief that there is little point or daunted by the prospect of complaining. Considering that non-manual occupations are significantly more likely to be satisfied with public services in Northern Ireland generally, although not necessarily in their local areas (see section 2.6 above), part of the explanation may well be their willingness to complain when services are poor or inadequate.

2.34 Respondents who complained did so in rank order about council services (34%); 22% about roads; 11% about public transport; 10% about health; and 5% about education (see table 12). This result must be treated with some care as responses were unprompted (no show card containing options was offered

<sup>39</sup> See Tony O'Brien *Research Bulletin 2* February Omnibus Survey: [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk)

to respondents) and confusion existed over what constituted 'council services'. Hence some respondents may have attributed services to councils incorrectly.

**TABLE 12: WHICH SERVICE DID YOU COMPLAIN ABOUT?**

	Rank order	Number
Council services	34%	90
Roads	22%	58
Public transport	11%	30
Health	10%	26
Education	5%	13
Housing	3%	9
Planning	3%	8
Water service	3%	8
Post Office	3%	8
Other services	5%	13
Total	100%	263

2.35 Complainants were asked the nature of their complaint and 71% responded that it had to do with the quality of service; 9% about timeliness; 6% about fairness (table 13).

**TABLE 13: NATURE OF COMPLAINT**

	Rank order	Number
Quality of service	71%	190
Timeliness	9%	23
Fairness	6%	17
Health & safety	3%	8
Others	11%	30
Total	100%	268

2.36 Complainants were also asked how satisfied they were that the complaint was dealt with. Some 56% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (see figure 9).

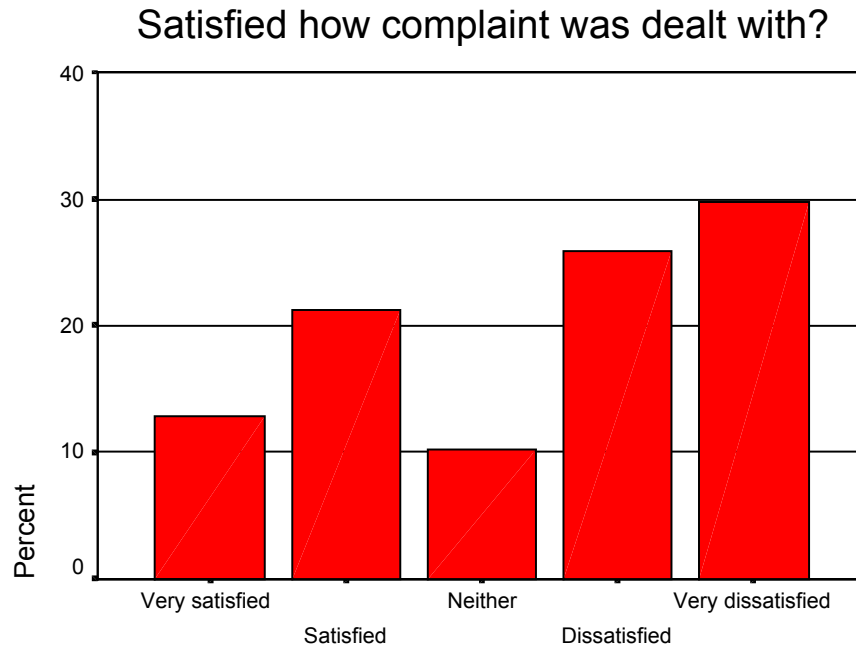


Figure 9

2.37 Finally, respondents were asked if they had ever wanted to make a complaint about public services, but didn't. Some 35% stated this to be the case (see figure 10).

### Wanted to complain - but didn't?

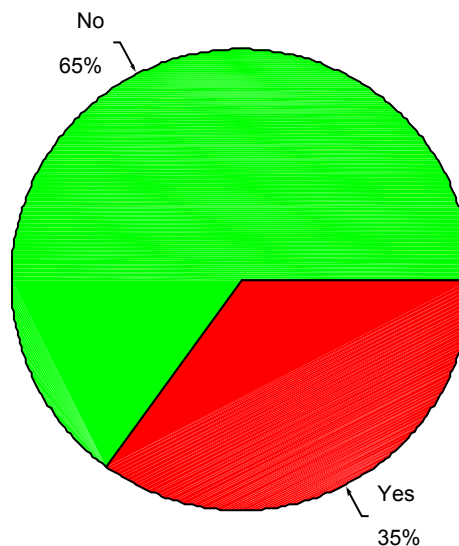


Figure 10

2.38 These respondents were then asked what had prevented them from complaining. Most said (57%) there was no point in complaining as nothing would be done anyway; some 15% said they didn't know who to complain to; 14% stated that the complaints procedures were too complicated; and 10% claimed apathy as the reason (table 14). Apathy could, of course, be linked to the complexity of the complaints process.

**TABLE 14: WHAT PREVENTED YOU COMPLAINING?**

	Rank order	Number
No point - nothing would be done	57%	236
Don't know how to complain	15%	63
Complaints procedure too complicated	14%	57
Apathy	10%	41
Avoid confrontation	1%	6
Takes too long	1%	6
Other	2%	8
Total	100%	417

2.39 **Public awareness of services:** to gain some insight into public awareness, respondents were asked which public bodies were responsible for a range of public services. There was a level of uncertainty as to which bodies provide some public services. There was a high degree of certainty about who provided services such as schools, social services, health services, leisure centres and dog control. There was confusion over services such as road maintenance, planning, housing, street lighting, water supply and community relations (table 15).

**TABLE 15: PUBLIC AWARENESS OF SERVICE PROVIDERS**

	Central government & NDPBs <sup>40</sup>	District Councils
Road maintenance	35%	57%
Road cleaning	11%	87%
Water supply	55%	33%
Leisure centres	13%	77%
Schools	96%	2%
Social services	96%	1%
Health services	96%	1%
Building regulations	36%	49%
Dog control	8%	84%
Street lighting	24%	68%
Planning	39%	48%
Housing	43%	37%
Community relations	25%	19%

<sup>40</sup> NDPBs include here: health boards, health and social services trusts, and education and library boards

2.40 **In summary**, what do these responses tell us of specific interest to the Review of Public Administration? Several points emerge:

- There is clearly considerable room for improvement in public service provision throughout Northern Ireland, given the levels of dissatisfaction both locally and regionally.
- Those services most in need of improvement (health and social services, education, roads, housing) tend to be delivered through executive non-departmental public bodies (excluding roads).
- Improvement in the quality of public services is the overriding consideration in the minds of the public. For service users this equates to services delivered on time, in an efficient way, which meet their needs and are accessible.
- Telephone access to public services, information about services and as a means of contacting providers is the preferred method of communication.
- Older people and the disabled are perceived to be less well treated in the provision of public services.
- People do not feel engaged by public service providers:
  - they don't have enough say in service provision in their areas;
  - their views tend not to be listened to;
  - the public sector does not keep them well-informed.
- Engagement and participation are not strongly associated with quality improvement in public services.
- There is a lack of confidence in complaining about public services:
  - those who complain often feel dissatisfied with the outcome;
  - those who want to complain, but don't, feel it is futile as nothing will be done.
- There is some confusion in the minds of the public as to which bodies have responsibility for key services (road maintenance, planning, housing, street lighting and water supply).

2.41 From this evidence, some key points emerge of particular relevance for the Review Team as follows:

- Executive non-departmental bodies (and to a lesser extent government agencies) have responsibility for those services perceived to be most in need of improvement. That said, there might be some confusion around the service 'health and social services'. Although 'health' is unambiguous as a public service, 'social services' is sometimes confused with social security.
- People don't have enough say in public service provision in their areas. There is a lack of local accountability – this is likely to be for central government departmental services provided at the local level. The RES focus group work, for example, found 'widespread pessimism about the citizen's ability to influence events in most circumstances'. This was particularly true, according to their research, with the health service 'and the perceived mysteries of the planning services'<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> See [www.rpani.gov.uk/focusgroups/main.htm](http://www.rpani.gov.uk/focusgroups/main.htm)

2.42 Having considered, at a general level, people's views on public services in Northern Ireland, we now turn to a more detailed assessment of governance arrangements. Therein we examine public services provided at three broad levels - central government departments and their agencies; local government; and non-departmental public bodies.

### 3. LEVELS OF GOVERNANCE - EVIDENCE FROM THE SURVEYS

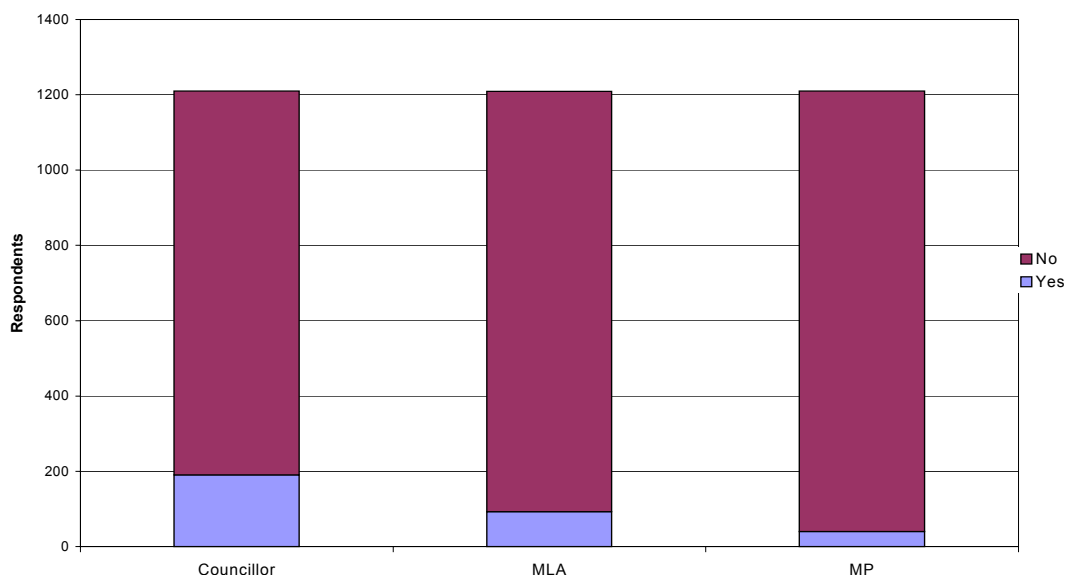
3.1 At the outset of the Review of Public Administration, the former First Minister argued that it was one of the major tasks facing the Executive and 'will be central to the way in which we deliver, structure and organise our public services in the future'<sup>42</sup>. He pointed out that the Review would consider:

- The structure, responsibilities and delivery of services by local government.
- The discharge and delivery of services under any of the 11 government departments (although not the distribution of their functions).
- The accountability and co-ordination of public bodies at arm's length from government.

What do the survey data tell us about public opinion on services provided by these levels of governance: local government, non-departmental public bodies and central government departments? We consider each in turn.

3.2 **Local Government.** A number of survey responses are useful in assessing public opinion on district councils and the provision of local services. For example, respondents were asked if they could tell which district council area they lived in. Almost 99.9% of respondents correctly named their council area. One key rationale for the institutions of local government is that they ought to reflect and reinforce people's sense of place and of community. Clarke and Stewart argue, for example, 'a local authority has the capacity to shape an area, to preserve it, to develop it, to change it, and in doing so to give it a new identity'<sup>43</sup>. The fact that people are aware of their council area affirms their

Figure 11: Contact with elected representative



<sup>42</sup> Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly Debate: Review of Public Administration, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Clarke and Stewart (1991) cited in D. Wilson and C. Game (1998) Local Government in the United Kingdom. London: Macmillan.

affinity with local structures of administration.

- 3.3 That local authorities provide a sense of identity for people, is reinforced by respondents' answer to the question if they had had any contact with their elected representatives in the last year. Some 16% of respondents had contacted their local councillor, 8% their MLA (and of course since 55% of our former MLAs were also local councillors, it may be the same person), and 3% their MP. This again is a telling response. Given the relatively few executive functions for which local councils have responsibility, people see councillors as their most accessible source of help. Councillors themselves attest to the large number of constituents' queries/problems they are asked to deal with which have little, if anything, to do with the remit of the local authority (e.g. housing, social security, roads) (figure 11).
- 3.4 The accessibility of local councils is reinforced by survey evidence gathered from respondents who were asked if they had made contact with their local council in the last year (apart from making a complaint), for example, to secure information about services or to obtain a service. Some 21% of respondents had contact with the local council in the last year (see figure 12).

### Contact with Council in the last year

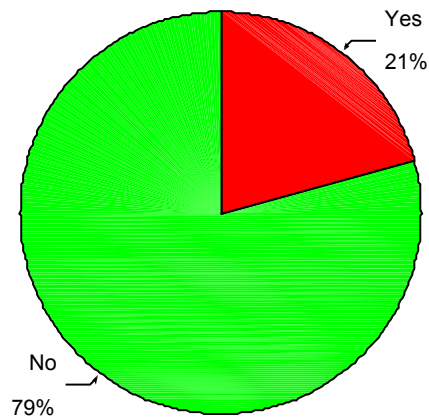


Figure 12

3.5 Of those who had, the majority (82%) stated that this contact was very useful or useful. This indicates a high degree of customer responsiveness at the local authority level (figure 13).

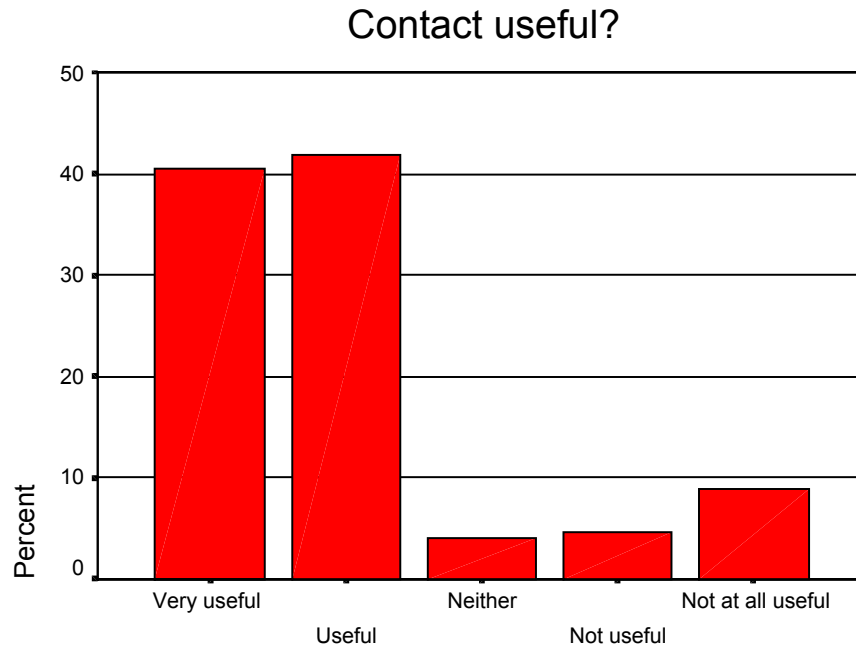


Figure 13

3.6 A series of questions were posed of survey respondents which shed light on the public's perception of local authorities as a service provider. In the first case respondents were asked if councils are best placed to provide services because councillors are aware of local needs. Almost 70% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. This represents a major endorsement of local

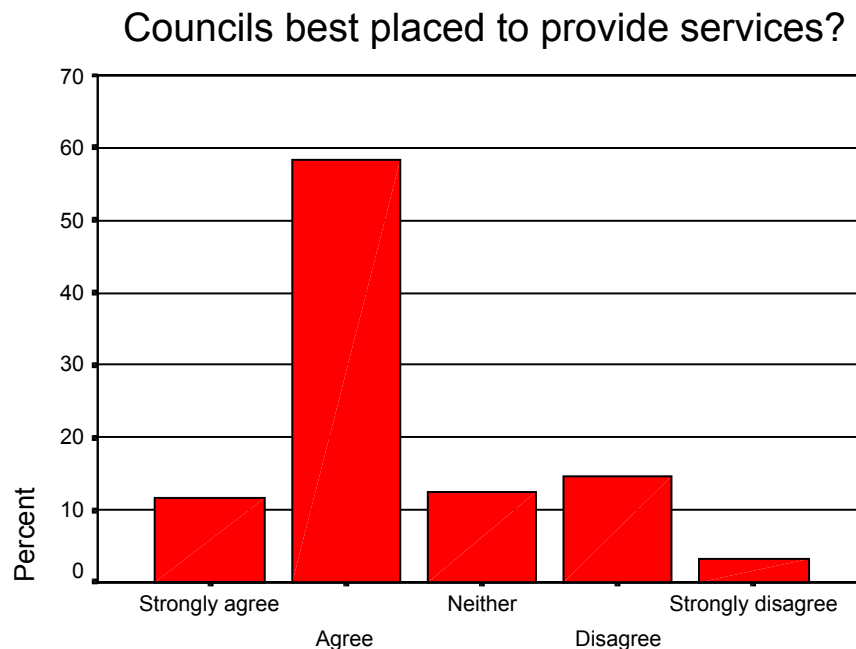


Figure 14

government generally (figure 14).

3.7 We explored further whether this endorsement was widespread across the 26 council areas by cross-tabulating this variable with the district council area in which the respondent lived. For ease of interpretation the councils were collapsed into Belfast City Council and councils in the East and West. The results are shown in table 16.

		Awareness of local needs		
		Agree <sup>44</sup> %	Neither %	Disagree <sup>45</sup> %
Area	Belfast	17	20	10
	East	46	49	46
	West	37	31	44
Total N = 1194		835	148	211

The results indicate a weak association between the variables and hence widespread geographic support for local provision 'because councillors are aware of local needs' in the East, West and Belfast areas respectively<sup>46</sup>.

3.8 Secondly, and as a natural follow-on, respondents were asked if councils were best placed to provide services because councillors are directly accountable to

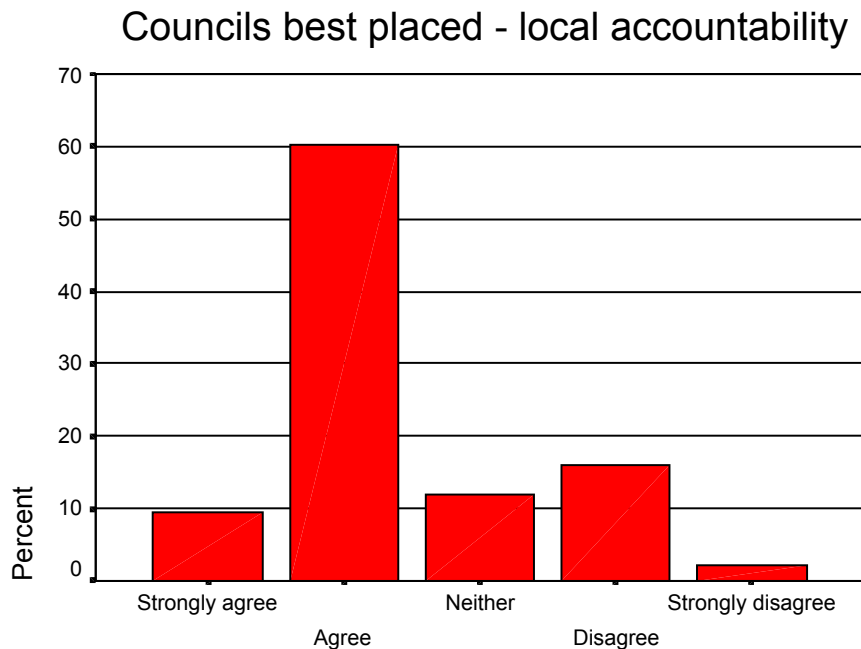


Figure 15

<sup>44</sup> Category includes 'strongly agree' and 'agree'.

<sup>45</sup> Category includes 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'.

<sup>46</sup>  $\chi^2 = 10.99$ ; Cramer's V = .068;  $p < .05$

local people. Here again, almost 70% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. Local electoral accountability is therefore essential to the public when it comes to service provision (figure 15). This is an important finding more generally in the context of Direct Rule compared to devolved government in Northern Ireland.

- 3.9 An interesting question is whether this sizeable endorsement of the accountability of councils, councillors and local services is evenly spread throughout the various local authorities. We cross-tabulated the accountability variable with district council areas in which respondents lived. For ease of interpretation, the areas are further collapsed into Belfast, East and West. The data are shown in table 17.

		Local accountability		
		Agree <sup>47</sup> %	Neither %	Disagree <sup>48</sup> %
Area	Belfast	17	20	9
	East	46	44	51
	West	37	36	40
Total N = 1190		829	144	217

The results show a weak association between the two variables. Hence, support for local services, because of councillors' direct accountability, is geographically widespread in the East, West and Belfast respectively<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Category includes 'strongly agree' and 'agree'.

<sup>48</sup> Category includes 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'.

<sup>49</sup>  $\chi^2 = 11.04$ ; Cramer's V = .068;  $p < .05$

## Local Council - local services

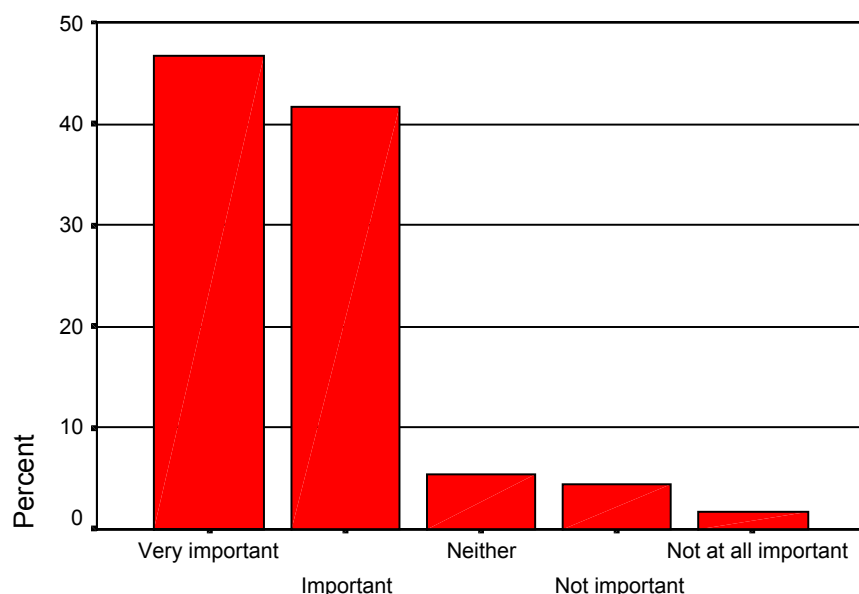


Figure 16

3.10 Finally, respondents were asked how important it was that there is a local council to provide services in their areas. Some 88% replied that it was very important or important to have a local council provide services in their area. This is a sizeable endorsement of the future role for local government in any review process (figure 16).

3.11 We were interested to explore whether this large degree of support for service provision by local councils was geographically distinctive. We therefore cross-tabulated the variable 'importance for local council service provision' with the council areas of the respondents. Again for ease of reporting the 26 councils are collapsed into Belfast, East and West. The results are shown in table 18.

Table 18: Area lived in and importance of local council

		Importance of council provision		
		Importance <sup>50</sup> %	Neither %	Unimportant <sup>51</sup> %
Area	Belfast	16	18	13
	East	46	43	49
	West	38	39	38
Total N = 1204		1064	65	75

The results show a very weak association between the variables and hence widespread support for local councils to provide services in their areas<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Category includes 'important' and 'very important'.

<sup>51</sup> Category includes 'not important' and 'not at all important'.

Belfast City Council was considered less important as a local service provider than councils in the West and East of the Province, respectively.

- 3.12 **Central Government Departments and Agencies:** survey material provides us with some (albeit limited) information about central government departments and their executive agencies. As detailed in section 2 of this paper, respondents were asked the question 'which public services needed greatest improvement'? These were ranked as health and social services, education, roads, housing... (see table 2 above). Since three of the key services identified (excluding roads) operate through non-departmental public bodies, this might prompt questions as to whether structural changes to the provision of these functions could ultimately lead to service improvement. Clearly there is no direct link between changing the administrative architecture and improved services, but increased centralisation/agentisation could result in greater political accountability in running these services and, as a result, provide checks on service quality.
- 3.13 **Non- Departmental Public Bodies:** evidence from the survey again provides some interesting insights into the public perception of quangos and hence support for their continuance in any reform process. In the first instance, respondents were asked simply about their awareness of quangos. Each respondent was given an example of some public services which were provided through non-departmental public bodies (e.g. Education and Library Boards, Health Boards, Planning Service<sup>53</sup> and the Rural Development Council) and then asked whether they were aware of these types of bodies. Some 48% of respondents, in spite of this explanation, were not aware of these bodies. Given that non-departmental bodies have a collective responsibility for

### Aware of quangos?

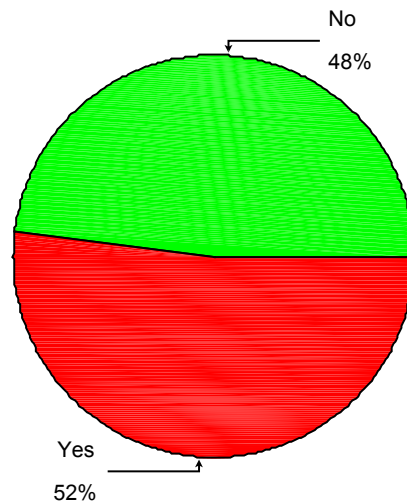


Figure 17

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<sup>52</sup>  $\chi^2 = 0.89$ ; Cramer's V = .019;  $p > .05$

almost £5 billion of public expenditure in Northern Ireland, this represents a major lack of public awareness, and hence accountability to customers, for key public sector functions, accepting of course that quangos are subject to a range of other accountabilities - legal, financial, and managerial (figure 17).

- 3.14 We were interested to explore whether there was a relationship between respondents awareness of quangos and perceptions of 'being kept informed' by public services. *A priori*, one would expect that those who felt public services kept them well informed would also be aware of quangos. The evidence however does not support this assumption (see table 19).

		Informed public		
		Well informed <sup>54</sup> %	Neither %	Not well informed <sup>55</sup> %
Awareness of quangos	Yes	57	51	51
	No	43	49	49
Total N = 1209		423	160	626

The results show a weak association between the variables<sup>56</sup>. Hence 49% of respondents who were not well informed by public services about what they were doing, were also unaware of quangos. But 43% of respondents who were well informed also lacked knowledge of quangos. This simply reinforces the lack of visibility, understanding and, by implication, accountability of non-departmental public bodies in the minds of the public.

- 3.15 Notwithstanding these findings, if continued or enhanced provision via non-departmental public bodies were to find public support, there would be interest in who should be members and how they would be appointed. Survey evidence from respondents on these two questions is as follows. In the former, 40% of the respondents felt quangos members should be professionals (e.g. teachers, doctors and lawyers); 30% of respondents suggested members of the general public; and 14% advocated local councillors as board members (table 20).

**TABLE 20: WHO SHOULD BE ON QUANGOS?**

	Rank order	Number
Professionals	40%	408
General public	30%	307
Local councillors	14%	141
Community/voluntary workers	8%	87
Others	8%	83
Total	100%	1026

<sup>53</sup> Although the Planning Service was listed in the question posed to respondents as an example of an executive non-departmental public body, it is in fact a Government Agency.

<sup>54</sup> Category includes 'well informed' and 'very well informed'.

<sup>55</sup> Category includes 'not well informed' and 'not at all well informed'.

<sup>56</sup>  $\chi^2 = 3.78$ ; Cramer's V = .056;  $p > .05$

- 3.16 When asked how should board members be appointed (by comparison with the current system of ministerial appointment), 51% of respondents suggested they be elected by the public; 15% nominated by fellow professionals; and 14% appointed by minister. This response would suggest an aversion to a system which is based on appointments (or as critics might argue ministerial patronage) and support for a more democratic process under any future arrangements - see table 21. This is not to devalue the work done by existing non-departmental public bodies.

**TABLE 21: HOW SHOULD QUANGOS MEMBERS BE APPOINTED?**

	Rank order	Number
Elected by the public	51%	532
Nominated by fellow professionals	15%	153
Appointed by minister	14%	145
Nominated by local councils	7%	76
Others	7%	75
Nominated by relevant bodies	7%	62
Total	6%	1043

- 3.17 **Other models/providers:** Thus far, the concentration has been on the role played by the public sector in service provision. Survey evidence provides some interesting insights into the potential involvement of other sectors in public service delivery. For example, when asked how should the community and voluntary sectors be involved in public services in Northern Ireland, 38% of respondents stated that they should have a role in providing services, 25% in planning services, 18% in policy development, and 17% in lobbying (table 22).

**TABLE 22: ROLE OF VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

	Rank order	Number
Providing services	38%	396
Planning services	25%	256
Policy development	18%	185
Lobbying	17%	175
Advocacy	2%	28
Total	100%	1040

- 3.18 When questioned about how the private sector should be involved in public services in Northern Ireland, 51% of respondents stated they should be providing services, 20% planning services, 14% policy development, and 12% lobbying (table 23). There is therefore sizeable support for both the voluntary/community sector and the private sectors to become involved in public service provision. This is an important finding in light of the Review's interest in the scope of the public sector.

**TABLE 23: ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR**

	Rank order	Number
Providing services	51%	481
Planning services	20%	186
Policy development	14%	128
Lobbying	12%	117
Advocacy	3%	29
Total	100%	941

#### **4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT, CENTRALISATION OR ARMS-LENGTH?**

- 4.1 What, in broad terms, do the surveys tell us about service provision at the three levels examined? One of the key messages is the obvious endorsement of the role played by local government. Despite the limited functional responsibilities of councils, people have a natural affinity with their own local authority area, value access to local councillors and see councils as bodies which are both aware of their service needs and directly accountable to the electorate for local provision. This would suggest a large measure of support for local government in any future arrangements coming out of the Review. What it doesn't tell us, however, is whether there is public support for the existing emasculated system of local government or stronger local government responsible for key additional functions. Respondents were clearly commenting on the role of councils under existing arrangements. Could their attitudes change, for example, if there were fewer councils with greater powers? Typically, in these circumstances, 'localness' is of a different order, and an understanding of needs may be less obvious because of the larger geographical scale in new (proposed) local government areas. Councillors could also become less accessible under any proposals for stronger (and by design, larger) local government. Hence endorsement of local government is not unconditional. Expectations of public services are high and it should be emphasised that people have no real interest in who provides, rather the quality of provision.
- 4.2 In considering centrally provided services, the evidence suggests the need for improvement in key service areas such as health and social services, education, roads, and housing respectively. With the exception of roads, non-departmental public bodies play a key role in the current delivery of these services. In keeping with idea of abolishing quangos which is integral to increased centralisation, many of the key services currently delivered through non-departmental bodies would transfer into departmental control. The key question in all of this is whether improvement in these services identified by the public could result from their re-location within departments. In other words, will structural reconfiguration, of itself, lead to service improvements in these areas?
- 4.3 It follows from the argument above that there is no public affinity for quangos. Given that survey evidence highlights ignorance of many of these bodies, this must suggest a limited degree of accountability to users. Hence, by implication, there would appear to be little public support for reforms which elevated their role/status. Given the public's suggestion that members should be (largely) elected to existing boards, rather than democratise them and in some senses attempt to emulate other elected fora, it would seem sensible to rethink their current status with options for bringing their functions under direct democratic control either centrally or locally.

- 4.4 Finally, the potential roles that could be played by the voluntary & community and the private sectors should not be overlooked. This is particular true of the former which is currently the subject of a major Task Force Review on its future role and long-term sustainability (carried out under the auspices of the Department for Social Development). Given the strong public support for their possible involvement in delivery and planning of public services, some consideration needs to be given as to how these sectors can work alongside or in partnership with public providers, whatever future structural provision emerges.
- 4.5 This re-examination of the Omnibus data and emerging policy considerations are summarised in table 24.

**TABLE 24: OMNIBUS SURVEY DATA  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

<b>Broad themes</b>	<b>What the data tell us</b>	<b>Policy considerations</b>
<p><b>EXISTING PROVISION BY THE PUBLIC SECTOR</b></p> <p>What the public think about current public services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Considerable room for quality improvement in health and social services, education, roads and housing respectively.</li> <li>▪ ‘Quality’ for users equates to services delivered on time, in an efficient way, which meet their needs and are accessible.</li> <li>▪ People do not feel engaged by public service providers.</li> <li>▪ There is a lack of confidence in complaining about public services.</li> <li>▪ Older people and the disabled are perceived as less well treated in the provision of public services.</li> <li>▪ Telephone access (one number) to public services, information about services, and a means of contacting providers is the preferred method of communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Executive non-departmental public bodies have responsibility for those services most in need of improvement.</li> <li>▪ People don’t have enough say in public service provision in their areas.</li> <li>▪ There is lack of accountability for central departmental services provided at the local level.</li> <li>▪ Accessibility, whilst important, is not <u>the</u> most important factor for service users.</li> </ul>
<p><b>LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ People have a strong sense of local identity.</li> <li>▪ Local councillors are a key access point for help/advice on public services generally.</li> <li>▪ Councils are aware of local needs, accountable to the electorate, and an important forum for local service provision.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Large degree of conditional support for local government in any future public administration arrangements.</li> <li>▪ Unclear whether this means support for existing system of local government or expanded functional role.</li> </ul>
<p><b>CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Non-departmental public bodies currently provide services most in need of improvement.</li> <li>▪ Increased centralisation suggests rethinking the role of non-departmental public bodies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reconsider the role of quangos.</li> <li>▪ Query whether structural reconfiguration will lead to service improvements in these services?</li> </ul>
<p><b>NON-DEPARTMENTAL PUBLIC BODIES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of awareness, and therefore accountability, of quangos.</li> <li>▪ If quangos are to be retained, members should be elected not selected.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No public affinity for quangos.</li> <li>▪ Should their functions come under direct democratic control (central or local)?</li> </ul>
<p><b>OTHER PROVIDERS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Support for involvement of voluntary &amp; community and private sectors in service provision, planning services and policy development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Need to consider future role for other sectors – voluntary &amp; community and private sectors.</li> </ul>

## 5. COMPARISONS WITH QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

5.1 The Review of Public Administration commissioned a parallel (but separate) research project which sought to examine 'the experiences, attitudes and opinions of the public on the provision of public services in Northern Ireland' through a series of focus groups<sup>57</sup>. Some 24 focus groups reflecting a range of variables (age, disabled status, socio-economic group, gender, religion, ethnicity and political opinion) were conducted on the following key issues:

- informing the public;
- changes in public services;
- listening to and communicating with public services;
- the role and performance of local councils;
- the role and performance of non-departmental public bodies.

5.2 It is useful to compare the findings of the two projects (see table 25). Both independent studies report many similarities in their findings with one important exception. There was divergence in the role of local councils and people's perception of the accountability of councillors. The qualitative findings were less supportive of local authorities than the Omnibus data. That said, the importance of locality - locally elected people, local knowledge of needs, and access to local councillors, was evident in both projects.

5.3 Returning specifically to the Omnibus data and reflecting on the information gathered to date, several issues are highlighted here which might inform future survey work. Very useful data have been gathered on public services at a general level without focussing on the different tiers of governance which comprise the public sector. Hence, people have been asked to express 'high level' opinions on public services. There is a need for these same questions to be asked in each of the sectors: local government, central government departments and non-departmental public bodies. Some of this is already happening. For example, under the Best Value initiative the 26 councils are now engaged in a large telephone survey of householders seeking views on services which they provide. This repeats work carried out in 2000. Other sectors or individual organisations have undertaken similar empirical studies. There is a need therefore to move from the general to the sectorally specific or to 'drill downwards' into components of the public sector. Our efforts to gain access to existing studies have been stymied by a reluctance to publish or divulge information within some sectors.

5.4 In short, to provide further insights into what the public think of public services, there is a need to:

- Pose the same or similar questions contained in the Omnibus surveys (e.g. on topics such as satisfaction, quality improvement, access, engagement, complaints etc.) at the sectoral level (local government, central

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<sup>57</sup> This was the second piece of qualitative research commissioned by the Review of Public Administration Team. The first project included eight specialist (Section 75) focus groups - see [www.rpani.gov.uk/focusgroups/main.htm](http://www.rpani.gov.uk/focusgroups/main.htm)

government departments, and non-departmental public bodies). This could be tracked over time using a survey such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times to provide a longitudinal data set.

- This can be done through collating existing empirical studies within these sectors or, more likely, a combination of what currently exists and new survey work at different levels of governance in Northern Ireland.

**TABLE 25: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

FOCUS GROUP WORK <sup>58</sup>	OMNIBUS DATA
<p>1. INFORMING THE PUBLIC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Internet access to information on public services is helpful to some users.</li><li>Advocates (e.g. local representatives) proved useful in seeking advice on public services</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Respondents expressed a preference for accessing services in the following rank order: one telephone number; one physical location or one-stop-shop and one website.</li></ul>
<p>2. CHANGES IN PUBLIC SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Focus group participants expressed positive views on physical and social improvements, performance information, role of the voluntary and community sector, recycling and direct payment systems for government benefits, although there were implementation problems with recycling and direct payments.</li><li>They were less positive about public transport, the planning service and the health service.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Respondents ranked health and social services, education, roads, housing and employment services as those most in need of improvement.</li><li>Over the last 5 years approximately one-third of respondents felt the quality of public services had improved, remained unchanged, or deteriorated (in each category).</li></ul>
<p>3. CHANGES IN PUBLIC SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mechanisms for communicating with public services were cumbersome.</li><li>No point in complaining.</li><li>Clear, easy-to-use procedures were needed.</li><li>Through frustration, complainants were turning to the media.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>People do not feel engaged by public providers.</li><li>Their views are listened to only to a limited extent or not at all.</li><li>There is a lack of confidence in complaining because: there is little point - nothing is done; didn't know how to complain; complaints procedures were too complicated and apathy, respectively.</li></ul>
<p>4. LOCAL COUNCILS - SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>There was praise for councils' efforts in recycling but implementation problems.</li><li>Participants supported the retention of existing council services.</li><li>Council service provision was adjudged 'average to poor quality'.</li><li>Councillors were not seen as accountable.</li><li>There was support for local people with local knowledge running services.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Local councillors are a key access point for help and advice on public services generally.</li><li>Councils are aware of local needs, accountable to the electorate, and an important forum for local service provision.</li></ul>
<p>5. PUBLIC BODIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Participants recognised the need for specialists in running public services.</li><li>They saw public bodies as part of government with no real accountability.</li><li>There was distrust about the impartiality of ministers.</li><li>More transparent appointment procedures were advocated</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Respondents lacked awareness of the roles and functions of non-departmental public bodies.</li><li>There was no public appetite for quangos.</li><li>If they were to be retained, members should be elected, not selected.</li></ul>

<sup>58</sup> This is a crude summary of the work conducted via the focus group research. Further details of the project are published on the Review of Public Administration website: [www.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk).

**APPENDIX 1**

**UNDERSTANDING SATISFACTION**

## Understanding ‘Satisfaction’

### Introduction

In everyday parlance, ‘satisfaction’ is usually regarded in positive terms - to be satisfied is to be pleased or fulfilled, for instance. Inevitably, however, when applying the term to an analysis of popular views of the public sector – both of employees and goods & services provided - a greater level of sophistication is required, befitting the often complex and sometimes insoluble nature of the issues and problems under consideration. Therefore, if superficial or cosmetic changes that merely make ‘good copy’ and chase headlines are to be avoided in favour of more thoroughgoing and meaningful work, a clearer understanding of the term ‘satisfaction’ is essential if the most effective use is to be made of results of the Omnibus Surveys, Focus Groups and other measures of public opinion. However, as the following discussion illustrates, the concept is not as straightforward as is often initially supposed, all of which implies that any diagnosis of the key issues and problems in the public sector - as well as any proposed solutions, especially those promising quick fixes - merit a clear health warning.

### Changing Values

Reflecting the spirit of the times, the public sector has been no stranger to broader changes in society (Moore, 1995, pp.36-7). That is, the major drive on measuring and increasing satisfaction in the public sector is a product of several broader changes within society, coupled with a resolve by successive central governments across the western democracies to ensure improved productivity in their public sectors - delivering better results (and, it is reasoned, satisfaction) with stable or even diminishing resources. At the heart of this universal public sector modernisation agenda is the idea that services must be increasingly responsive to the needs and aspirations of their customers. Gauging and measuring public opinion and views has become commonplace within organisations of all types. When, supposedly, the ‘consumer is king’, ensuring consumer satisfaction is accorded primacy in the mission statements and *raison d’être* of organisations of all types. Countless surveys of citizens, customers, consumers, and clients have been conducted, reported in myriad newsletters, newsheets, annual reports, newspaper articles and other publications. Despite this, there is a real risk of becoming information rich and knowledge poor. For example, until recently, systematic national surveys have been less common than the numerous surveys that have focused on individual services and individual providers. In one sense, the emphasis of enquiry reflects an obvious problem - how can generic surveys of ‘Health’ and ‘Education’ mean anything? Nonetheless, difficulties notwithstanding, efforts continue apace to extract that last morsel of information or opinion on which to assess satisfaction.

In the UK, the ‘Modernising Government’ initiative has sought to ensure that policy making is more joined up and strategic, that public service users rather than producers are the focus by matching services more closely to people’s lives, and to deliver high quality and efficient public services. Modernising Government works through pre-existing policy initiatives like the Charter Mark Programme (from 1991), re-branded and revamped as ‘Service First’ after 1997. Service First espoused nine first principles: set standards of service; be open and provide full information; consult and

involve; encourage access and the promotion of choice; treat all fairly; put things right when they go wrong; use resources effectively; innovate and improve; and, work with other providers. While most of these principles echoed the earlier Charter Mark Programme, Service First also heralded the establishment of the new 'People's Panel', designed to "provide a convenient and reliable mechanism through which Government can consult with citizens on how public services are delivered and how that delivery can better reflect the needs of the user rather than the existing system" (Chief Executives' Forum, 2001a, p.35). In Scotland, separate but essentially replica arrangements have been developed by the Scottish Executive's Central Research Unit. For Northern Ireland, the suitability of the People's Panel as an appropriate mechanism for gauging local views is questionable given the small sample based here.

Until recently, no systematic Government-commissioned survey work of satisfaction with local government as an institution had been done since the work of the Widdicombe Committee in the mid-1980s. Nonetheless, there have been countless exercises in each individual authority, often based on individual services. These have been underpinned by the work of the Audit Commission, all of which has been underscored by the requirements of the Best Value Performance Indicators regime post-1997. Best Value is the Labour Government's replacement for its Conservative predecessor's more narrowly focused emphasis on compulsory competitive tendering in local government. It strives to ensure that there is increased consultation between service users and providers. As a consequence, a wealth of statistics and other data have been generated. However, for all that, any perceptions of local government that can be gleaned are often influenced heavily by the media at national level and by service delivery, as opposed to communications, at local level. Experiences of local services are more important than communications through the letterbox. You can create false expectations if your communications are excellent but the services you deliver are not. Surveys by polling and market research organisations in both the public and private sectors have shown a strong correlation between how familiar residents are with an organisation and its services, and how favourable residents are towards the organisation. The link between familiarity and favourability holds true for local councils. Likewise, perceptions of how remote and impersonal an authority is tend to correlate with overall favourability and is also an indicator of effectiveness of communications.

Reflecting the national picture, but with added the impetus provided by the equality legislation such as Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the devolved administration within Northern Ireland framed its Programme for Government. Although Programme for Government did not explicitly refer to Service First, many of its priorities and targets are consistent with the Service First theme. Indeed, the Service First Unit, subsequently the Northern Ireland Public Service Improvement Unit, in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister promotes the initiative.

The commitment within the devolved administration to greater consultation builds on earlier work. During 1999, the Chief Executives' Forum (2001a, 2001b) had undertaken work in this regard in association with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Omnibus Survey. It expressed the view that a considerable range of consultation activity existed but that "there was apparently very

little co-ordination in the field of customer satisfaction measurement, both in carrying out surveys and in sharing results”, adding that “while the diversity of public services in Northern Ireland is such that no single survey could meet the needs of all the bodies, ... there is considerable scope for promoting good practice and a more standardised approach in the way customer satisfaction surveys are commissioned” (Chief Executives’ Forum, 2001a, p.1). Most surveys were of customer satisfaction rather than public attitudes.

### **A Question of Trust?**

Before considering satisfaction in more detail, it is useful to reflect on some of the circumstances that helped give rise to the recent focus on consumer satisfaction. In some ways, that focus on satisfaction is tantamount to a tacit admission of failure and a loss of trust or faith in government. That is, for whatever reasons, real or imagined, the sense of being let down by the state as provider has encouraged people as voters, taxpayers, and users of public services, as well as many politicians, academics and elements within the media, to ask awkward questions. In common with other advanced liberal democracies, the UK is now a less deferential society too. Greater assertiveness among sections of the population, based in part on greater awareness of individual rights and alarm occasioned by media reporting of appalling instances of negligence, incompetence, abuse of power or worse, the public is increasingly reluctant to accept things ‘on trust’. Instead, anxious and aggrieved citizens have sought and demanded additional safeguards often involving alternative forms of accountability and regulation. In response, worried governments – and in some instances the professions themselves - have sought to allay public concerns by recourse to increasingly statutory regulation and other devices. Inevitably, even when motivated by the best of intentions, there are unintended consequences or side effects that may or may not outweigh the benefits of intervention. One such effect has been that the status and powers of the great professions such as law, medicine, accountancy, teaching, policing and nursing – the traditional but unspoken guardians of quality governed by their own codes of conduct and self-regulation based on professional ethics - have been eroded, indeed, swept away in some instances. It might even be argued that, in the very quest for ensuring and maintaining ‘quality’, lays an implicit confession that it has already slipped away. We offer no opinion as to the rights and wrongs of these developments, nor their relative desirability. Rather, they are reported as a commentary on social change that has served to alter the context within which public administration must function, and to which it must, of necessity, respond.

Trust is at the heart of the relationship between government and citizens. For many observers, there is a ‘crisis of trust’, although others prefer to speak instead of a ‘culture of suspicion’. Either way, dissatisfaction with the (perceived or proven) inadequacies of the traditional forms of accountability (rooted in adherence to professional codes of ethics and values) has fostered alternatives. Most notably, there has emerged a growth of accountability to regulators based on judgments of performance against targets, rather than the ‘intelligent accountability’ of professionals to the public.

Members of the public have relationships with people who provide a service, not with the organisation behind them. This provides the context for an

important finding from the research: that trust in individual service providers like doctors and police officers has remained consistently high over the past twenty years, but trust in the organisations and institutions they work for is lower and has declined in recent years (Audit Commission, 2002, p.4).

Trust is gained when the experienced quality of services and satisfaction with them is high and organisations are perceived as honest and competent, tell the truth, are open about mistakes, and are seen to take steps to learn from these mistakes. However, within these broad areas are a number of interrelated themes. For example, the public's perceptions of the quality of services is affected by the quality of information provided about them and in particular the availability of independent information evaluating their performance and the direct contact experienced by members of the public, or reported by their friends and family. The media are not a particularly strong driver of trust in public bodies, either negatively or positively, although they do help to create the general impression of what organisations are like. Overall, satisfaction and trust appear to be reasonably high in general. However, there is a paradox.

It is that the part of the public sector with direct accountability to the public, through local elections, is the one that clearly is less trusted on a range of issues. Why should this be so? It seems possible that the political process itself – of debate, charge and rebuttal – appears to turn voters off. Even though councillors are more trusted than national politicians, who attract among the lowest ratings of trust of any group, there is likely to be an effect (Audit Commission, 2002, p.10).

Resolving this paradox is beyond the scope of this paper. However, inasmuch as the decline of trust (or culture of suspicion) demands new measures to restore faith, ensuring 'satisfaction' appears to be a preferred method.

### **Conceptual Difficulties - Interpreting Satisfaction**

To ensure satisfaction requires a clear definition of what is meant by the term, a better understanding of what makes customers satisfied, and how this can be measured. However, defining what constitutes 'satisfaction', let alone attempting to measure it – successfully, indeed, satisfactorily – is not straightforward. An indication of the complexity involved is that there is a wide range of approaches to understanding satisfaction and service quality that have spawned upwards of 15000 academic and trade articles. This plethora of output illustrates how there are disagreements and differences in the concepts, definitions, measurement methods and interpretation. Satisfaction is bound up inextricably with questions of trust, communication, media, local/regional/national intergovernmental power and resource relationships, as well as personal experiences, prejudices and preferences.

Even if the obstacles can be surmounted, there needs to be clarity over the different purposes to which customer attitude research can be put. For example, is it done in order to highlight priorities for improvement within an individual service? Or to compare different units providing the same service (such as different regional offices) so as to raise efficiency? Is it about comparing different services? Or, perhaps it is concerned to monitor changes in perceptions and performance over time. It may well involve various permutations of these and other reasons. Additionally, in drawing

comparisons or monitoring change, other factors merit consideration. Normative comparisons require a greater understanding of whether these comparisons are fair (that is, comparing like with like). Likewise, longitudinal comparisons must be sensitive to changes in wider factors than just service delivery (change in the make up of clients, change in global expectations or the image of the service etc.). An additional dimension concerns the role of expectations since these are pivotal to any meaningful enquiries on customer satisfaction.

There is a conundrum at the heart of many satisfaction surveys in the public sector. That is, it is important to remember that most surveys seek to measure customer (or client) satisfaction as opposed to citizen satisfaction for they are distinct (Moore, 1995, pp.37-8). The former tends to focus more on an individual service – or at least as it or they is/are perceived by the user. The latter is more generic in nature. Thus, in examining customer satisfaction, the questions posed relate directly to the delivery of services at an operational level. By contrast, citizen surveys may well assess issues such as whether certain services should be provided by the public sector at all. Invariably, the priority of users is for better service but as citizens they may also acknowledge that (with finite limits), resources may be better deployed elsewhere. The challenge for the public sector is to balance the two distinct, and often competing, factors of value for money for citizens with high quality, accessible for clients. As Moore (1995) notes, however:

In the end, none of the concepts of ‘politically neutral competence’, ‘policy analysis’ and ‘program evaluation’, or ‘customer service’ can finally banish politics from its preeminent place in defining what is valuable to produce in the public sector. Politics remains the final arbiter of public value just as private consumption decisions remain the final arbiter of private value. Public managers can proceed only by finding a way to improve politics and to make it a firmer guide as to what is publicly valuable. That is why political management must be part of our conception of what public managers do” (p.38)

While some elementary aspects may be similar, measuring satisfaction in the public sector is inevitably more complicated than its private sector counterpart. In the private sector, for instance, many models of service quality focus on the aim of increasing consumption of services and/or increasing customer loyalty with the ultimate aim being the profit motive. Leaving aside questions of equity (resource distribution in society) and externalities (pollution and involuntary third party effects), the market mechanism functions reasonably well, mediated through the interaction of supply and demand, reflected in myriad price/quantity equilibria. However, for many public services, such considerations are less in evidence, often invisible, or indeed irrelevant. As often monopoly suppliers, customers are compelled to consume the services (such as regulatory services). In other cases, consumers’ may be more satisfied (however defined) if they can avoid needing a service (such as healthcare, social services, public protection). It is also possible to overstate the differences between the public and private services and many confront similar situations and number of key lessons are transferable. However, there is a greater risk of is over-simplifying our understanding of public services; they clearly cover an enormous range of types of services, which vary in a number of important ways. For example, the target group could be the public as a whole, or a small sub set of the population, businesses, the

community/voluntary sector, or other public sector bodies etc. Or, the nature of use might vary from regulatory/compulsory versus voluntary services. Some services may be used as a one-off occasion or episodically versus those used regularly. Some may be free at the point of use while other may have costs associated. The methods of contact/service delivery vary too. The market position can differ also, from specialist services as distinct from multi-functional services. It could be a monopoly supplier of one facing competition or where alternative services are available.

### **The Role of Expectations**

Distinguishing between service quality and satisfaction prompts several alternative schools of thought such as 'service quality' school and the 'satisfaction' school. One model associated with the satisfaction school is the disconfirmation theory that suggests that customer satisfaction with a service is related to the person's initial expectations. Essentially, if experience of the service greatly exceeds the expectations clients had of the service, then satisfaction will be high, and vice versa. In the service quality literature, perceptions of service delivery are measured separately from customer expectations, and the gap between the two provides a measure of service quality.

Understanding how expectations are formed is critical. Several key factors commonly regarded as having influence have been identified. These are: personal needs (the key needs that an individual expects to be addressed); previous experience (past experience of the service or other services, including comparison with similar private services); word of mouth communications (family, friends and colleagues, media and audit agencies); explicit service communications (statements, leaflets, newsletters, publicity); and, implicit service communication (physical appearance of staff and premises). In addition, 'brand image' or reputation is crucial. In the public sector especially, where there may be an absence of detailed information about competitor services or alternatives (and in easily digestible forms such as price/quantity trade-offs), it raises the importance of image. Constrained choice and limited benchmarks available to customers reinforce this.

The impacts of public services are wider than for private services. Moreover, the public's expectations of public services can be influenced by views of government and politicians can blur the distinction between politics, government and the public service. Indeed, perceptions of the government's honesty and integrity will affect assessments of the services received from government. With devolution, the nature of the relationship between the central and devolved administration is crucial. For instance, devolution in the UK has coincided with a quantum and sustained leap in the levels of public spending in key areas of policy that are now devolved. Since levels of spending are generally regarded as the principal proxy for standards of service (and hence satisfaction), it could be reasonably inferred that the more generous financial settlement of the post-devolution period accounts for more effective services (and therefore higher levels of satisfaction) than might otherwise be attributable to the act of devolution. Moreover, in Northern Ireland, the state of the 'peace process' and any popular personal antipathy towards certain members of elements of the coalition-style Executive means that reactions to the performance of particular services provided by departments whose minister hails from the 'other side' might overwhelm any dispassionate and objective appraisal. Simply, expectations of public services are not

only influenced by direct communications from the service, or even what the media says about service itself, but also the reputation of the government as a whole.

The impact of brand image or service reputation may be relatively minor if one is posing questions about very specific service elements. However, it is likely to have a major impact in more general or global ratings when public services often elicit stereotypical, critical responses that are influenced by the negative connotations of big, inefficient government. Generally, the more specific questions are, the more positive perceptions are seen to be. In much the same way, when comparing overall ratings of public services and private services, the views of public services were less positive. Again, however, when respondents were asked to compare specific public and private services, the differences become less pronounced. One explanation may be that personal values or beliefs also influence expectations remembering that individuals are reflecting on their role as both clients and citizens. Determining which is the greatest influence on the level of expectations is likely to be the nature of the customer group that is being served. Expectations have a central role in influencing satisfaction with services. In turn, a very wide range of factors determines these expectations, all of which are wider in respect of public services as distinct from private sector services. This is especially important when making comparisons over time and between services.

### **Determinants of Service Quality and Satisfaction**

Considerable work has been undertaken to identify the determinants of service quality and satisfaction. These determinants might include: access, aesthetics, attentiveness/helpfulness, availability, care, cleanliness/tidiness, comfort, commitment, communications, competence, courtesy, flexibility, friendliness, functionality, integrity, reliability, responsiveness, and security. In addition, examining the complaints and compliments that have been received by the service through routine customer monitoring can be helpful. Much work has been done on ranking or prioritising - trying to identify which factors of a service are the most important in determining overall satisfaction. Such studies suggest that reliability and responsiveness most often emerge as key. The final list of determinants and questions for an individual service should build on these and use a range of qualitative and other approaches to ensure particular features of the individual service are accounted for.

### **Definitional uncertainties and measurement issues**

Agreeing what 'satisfaction' actually means can have a considerable effect on how it is operationalised in any survey work. Several definitions spring to mind. For instance, does it mean happy? Relieved? Achieving aims? Achieving aims, and happy with outcome? No hassle? Perhaps it is combination of some or all of these. In one sense, 'satisfaction' can be viewed as a neutral or 'zero state'. In that way, satisfaction is merely an assessment that the service is adequate, as opposed to 'delight' which reflects a service that exceeds expectations. However, problems quickly ensue. Consider the following standard scale: very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied, very dissatisfied. While 'very satisfied' is generally indicative of positive sentiment, 'fairly satisfied' involves a much less uniform set of interpretations, possibly as implying 'I'm not very satisfied'. Even the 'middle ground' may be less neutral than might be imagined. Thus, 'neither satisfied

nor dissatisfied' does not mean expressing no opinion or sitting on the fence. Such respondents might be reflecting a range of judgements, generally involving balancing good and bad points or else reflecting the fact that their transaction or business with the service/organisation in questions is incomplete, and it is therefore too early to say.

Nor is a high preponderance of certain responses (for example, 'very satisfied') necessarily the 'best' outcome. A classic example might be welfare benefits. With benefits recipients, ratings were influenced by feelings towards the benefits system and the benefit received. Some might feel lucky and grateful, while others might experience guilt, shame and a sense of inferiority or inadequacy. That is, similar types of experience might code themselves as having different levels of satisfaction.

When analysing and interpreting survey results, an aggregation of very and fairly satisfied respondents will not automatically imply or represent a set of respondents who are 'happy' with the service, as it is interpreted.

Different scales elicit different responses. Scales based on expectations, improvement and 'compared to an ideal', tend to receive lower mean ratings than scales based on overall performance and satisfaction. Respondents are less likely to choose the most positive option in an expectations scale unless they really are extremely happy the item at issue. In part, this is because modifying adverbs such as 'fairly', 'quite' and 'slightly' have a clear effect on the type of response elicited. Fairly is seen as more moderate than quite. Moreover, 'fairly dissatisfied' is more negative than 'fairly satisfied' is positive.

## **Conclusions**

Understanding expectations is key to understanding satisfaction, since expectations appear to have an important impact on overall perceptions of services. However, it is not a straightforward relationship. 'Satisfied' has a range of meanings to individuals, while it generally seems to be a positive assessment of the service, modifying terms such as 'fairly' lead to problems with interpretation. In particular, those who say they are fairly satisfied do appear to be rather less positive than common interpretations suggest, and in many ways are closer to the fairly dissatisfied group. Similarly, a simple aggregation of very and fairly satisfied responses should not be interpreted as forming a bigger group who are 'happy' with the service. There are alternatives to satisfaction scales that could be explored using numeric and graphic scales.

Beyond these issues, it is useful to consider whether customer satisfaction should be our sole focus. Private sector models have moved from assessing consumer satisfaction to look at customer loyalty, and re-purchase and recommendation behaviour. These are clearly less relevant considerations for most public services. However, in the public sector, in reality, customer satisfaction is just one stage or level in a process of engagement with customers – awareness through trust, transaction, satisfaction, commitment and advocacy.

Ultimately, if there is a 'bottom line' about satisfaction, it is that it can be measured in a meaningful way but only if there is an awareness of the pitfalls and exogenous factors that influence it. Research findings are only useful if there is recognition of the context within which they were gathered. However, achieving the necessary

awareness almost certainly requires more thoroughgoing research into the concept of satisfaction so that it might be operationalised more productively.

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**APPENDIX 2**  
**TECHNICAL ANNEX**

## Technical Notes on Cross-tabulations

In cross tabulations we want to see whether two variables are related or associated. Two variables are said to be related or associated when the distribution of values on one variable differs for different values of the other. Taking the example from our data set which examines satisfaction with public services across different parts of Northern Ireland (East, West and Belfast). If satisfaction with public services differs according to where the respondents live, then 'geographic area' and 'satisfaction with the public services' are associated. If satisfaction with public services is much the same despite where people live, then the two variables are not associated but are independent of one another.

It is useful to summarise the information about association in a table by a single figure. This can provide a concise and easy overview of the character of association in the table. This is done by using a correlation co-efficient which is simply an index that provides a succinct description of the character of the relationship between the two variables.

Cramer's V provides a measure of the strength of the relationship between two variables from a contingency table and describes results which vary from 0 to 1. In this research we have chosen (arbitrarily) to describe the strength of the relationship as follows:

- 0 - 0.25 = 'weak' association
- 0.26 - 0.5 = 'moderate' association
- 0.51 - 0.75 = 'strong' association
- 0.76 - 1 = 'very strong' association.

It is however necessary to establish whether the relationship has arisen by chance, for example as a result of sampling error. We therefore need to know the probability (p) that there is a relationship between 2 variables in the population from which the sample was derived. In order to establish this probability, the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test is widely used in conjunction with contingency tables. This is a test of statistical significance, meaning that it allows the researcher to ascertain the probability that the observed relationship between 2 variables may have arisen by chance. If we say that the computed chi-square value is significant at the 0.05 level of statistical significance, we are saying that we would expect that a maximum of 5 in every 100 possible samples that could be drawn from a population might appear to yield a relationship between 2 variables, when in fact there is no relationship between them in the population.

In summary, the measure of association describes the extent of association (Cramer's V) between the two variables. The significance test (p) tells us whether that relationship is likely to be due simply to chance (sampling error) or whether it is likely to hold in the population from which the sample was drawn.