



Fermanagh & Omagh
District Council
Comhairle Ceantair
Fhear Manach agus na hÓmaí

Residents Survey - Executive Report

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Executive Report

This Executive Report presents a high level overview of the key themes emerging from the Council's 2021 residents survey, which was based on telephone interviews with a representative sample of 1002 Council residents. The survey was also supplemented with focus groups with residents.

Overall, the results from the survey are positive, with 84% of residents satisfied with the Council. This level of satisfaction compares favourably with the 67% of residents satisfied with the Council back in 2018, and benchmarks well against other Northern Ireland Councils and Councils in GB who averaged 67% in the latest survey.

The generally positive sentiment expressed by residents towards the Council is evidenced by other findings, with most (79%) residents seeing the Council as responsive to the needs of local people. On the key indicator of reputation, again the Council scores relatively well at 72% approval, which represents a significant improvement on the 2018 figure of 58%.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the last 12 months have been challenging for all public bodies in Northern Ireland, not least local Councils. However, the survey provides reassurance that the Council's response to the pandemic has been valued by residents, with most (87%) saying that the Council has responded well. Nevertheless the pandemic has had a significant impact on residents, with just over half (52%) reporting a negative impact on household finances.

The pandemic has also highlighted the variability in broadband provision across the District, with almost half (45%) saying that poor internet provision has been a challenge when working or studying from home. This issue of broadband connectivity was also highlighted in the focus groups with residents, with calls for the Council to continue to use its influence to ensure all residents are able to enjoy the benefits of a high quality broadband service. This is particularly important for the Council given that more services have moved online, with just under half (45%) of residents having used an online Council service. Indeed, and possibly as a result of the pandemic, the overwhelming majority (87%) of residents are supportive of the Council providing more services online where appropriate, albeit with the caveat that services still need to be accessible non-digitally to accommodate those residents who may struggle with poor broadband coverage, may have poor computer literacy, or who are not comfortable with using online methods to access services.

The survey also found that resident contact with the Council has almost doubled compared with 2018 (up from 22% to 39%). However, even with a greater number of residents contacting the Council, the contact experience continues to be positive, with 89% satisfied (up from 79% in 2018). Contact was mostly by phone (46%) and email (39%), which again reflects the challenge of delivering services during the pandemic. The website also continues to be an important contact point for residents, although satisfaction has fallen from a peak of 89% in 2018 to 71% in the current survey. Residents in the focus groups highlighted the value of the Council website and endorsed the website as an important information and communication channel for the Council.

The Council scored well on the indicator of keeping residents well informed about services and benefits (79% said the Council keeps them well informed which is up on the 2018 figure of 62%). Overall, Council information was found to be easily accessible (83%) for most residents, with Council publications (e.g. newsletter, magazine, flyers etc.) the preferred way (48%) for the Council to communicate with residents. Almost two out of three (65%) residents could recall receiving the Council magazine (inFO), with residents supportive of the Council continuing to produce a hard copy (74%) moving forward.

The Council also did relatively well in terms of engagement with residents, with 72% satisfied with the level of engagement the Council offers to local residents (up from 57% in 2018). However, those in the focus groups did call for more active engagement by the Council. Although the survey found that involvement in local decision making was limited among residents (21% involved in local decision making), those in the groups commented on not knowing how to get involved with the Council, or indeed how to get involved in decision making affecting their local areas. A general consensus in the groups was that the Council could be more proactive in this space by promoting awareness of opportunities for resident involvement, as well as communicating to residents how to actually get involved.

Although resident involvement in local decision making is relatively limited, a significant number (28%) said they regularly take part in local groups or community activities (up from 22% in 2018), with participation

levels higher in some areas (Erne North) compared with others (Omagh). Similarly, a quarter (25%) of residents said they had volunteered in the last year with volunteering levels higher in particular areas (e.g. Erne North having the highest and Enniskillen and Omagh the lowest levels). When asked about the main barriers to volunteering, the most common issues were lack of time and the current Covid-19 pandemic.

As with the 2018 survey, residents are overwhelmingly satisfied (92%) with their local area as a place to live, with most supporting the view that their local area has a strong sense of community (92%), people from different religions and backgrounds get on together (87%), and people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds get on together (85%). Indeed, the dominant view among residents is that their local area is welcoming to others (92%), with residents most commonly commenting on community spirit / looking after each other (19%), the scenery including mountains, lakes and farmland (18%), their areas being clean and tidy and well maintained (11%), and the people (10%).

The survey continues to provide a unique opportunity to support the Council's Community Planning function by generating robust data on resident health and wellbeing across the District. Overall, self-reported health status is consistent with 2018, with 81% of residents rating their health as excellent or good. The survey also provides measures on a range of other indicators (e.g. control over daily life, levels of social contact, mental health etc.), with significant variations between different resident segments (e.g. older residents reporting significantly lower levels of social contact as well as poorer mental health using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Health Scale). This information will support the Council in identifying and targeting services at those resident groups most in need of support.

Among the different aspects of life, residents were most satisfied with their living accommodation (7.1 out of 10) and least satisfied with broadband connectivity (6.3 out of 10). Again this information is broken down by factors such as resident age, gender and DEA, and will help the Council identify particular groups struggling with specific issues (e.g. residents in Erne East being least satisfied with broadband connectivity or residents of mid-Tyrone be least satisfied with mobile phone connectivity). This detailed information provides the Council with strong evidence to support the work of partner agencies to address these challenges within specific areas.

Specifically in relation to the focus groups, young people compared with other residents, were generally unaware of the full range of services provided by the Council, although a significant number of older residents in the groups still believe that the Council is responsible for roads. Indeed this misconception impacts on their perception of the Council generally, with calls for the Council to be more proactive in addressing this common misconception through awareness raising. Participants also wanted to see a more visible and transparent Council 'pushing out' into the community more.

Other common findings from the groups included rates being too expensive, with some saying that increasing household rates during the pandemic shows insensitivity by the Council. There were also calls for greater transparency on how the Council's budget is spent, with some participants of the opinion that some areas of the Council do better than others.

On a positive note, focus group participants welcomed the role of the Council in supporting residents during the pandemic (particularly in relation to food parcels), and coming out of the pandemic participants would like to see business rates being frozen to help sustain existing businesses. There were also calls for more engagement by the Council as well as support for young people in relation to mental health as well as for the Council to have an exit strategy for moving out of the pandemic.

Compared with the previous survey in 2018, this survey and the focus groups, provide evidence of improvement in terms of resident perception of the Council, with statistically significant increases in overall resident satisfaction as well as on other key corporate indicators such as reputation and responding to the needs of local residents. As noted previously, the Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging for the Council, and will be continue to present challenges for the Council in the months ahead. Although overall resident sentiment towards the Council is positive, the research has identified particularly groups of residents who do feel less well connected with the Council (e.g. lower social classes, less well educated and the economically inactive), and the challenge will be to ensure that the relationship between the Council and these groups is further strengthened.