



COMMUNITY SATISFACTION

Surveys

In my columns – How to get the Best Out of Our Councils – I have lamented the fact that it seems, from searching their websites, that our three local councils do not undertake Community or Customer Satisfaction Surveys, so I thought I would give some examples of the useful information that can be gained.

At Rockdale City Council in Sydney we undertook Community Satisfaction Surveys every year or two, partly to set baselines and report on trends in our reporting back to the community on progress in the achievement of the measures in the Council's Delivery Program and towards achieving the community's priorities in the Community Strategic Plan. The Mayor made a public presentation to the community every 6 months on the 'State of the City' based on the progress on the achievement of measures. We also used the feedback to improve services.

Rockdale City Council no longer exists as it was amalgamated with City of Botany Council to form Bayside Council. In 2013 the outcomes of the survey were 'a good result with opportunities for improvement':

'The outcomes indicate a positive result for Rockdale Council, with 35 of the 37 services/facilities rated from 'moderate' to 'very high'.

Overall satisfaction has declined from previous years, however it exceeds the 'All Of NSW Benchmark' and is in line with the NSW Metro norm'.

Comparisons with the research results from 2012 have found a positive increase in residents' level of satisfaction for:

- 1.Litter control and rubbish dumping
- 2.Recycling
- 3.Street cleaning/sweeping
- 4.Community safety/Crime prevention

Comparisons with the research results from 2012 have found a decline in residents' level of satisfaction with the following services/facilities:

- 1.Maintaining healthy natural waterways
- 2.Appropriateness of town planning controls
- 3.Quality of new development
- 4.Reporting to the community on Council activities, services and facilities.

The survey also revealed that the key concerns of the community were:

- Planning for a growing population
- Traffic/transport management
- General maintenance of local infrastructure
- Financial management/resource allocation
- Parking availability, and
- Condition of roads.

'Stated concerns mirror those of the broader Sydney Region i.e. creaky infrastructure serving too many users'.

86% Of Residents Indicated That They Are 'Somewhat Satisfied' To 'Very Satisfied' With Council's Performance in 2013 which had fallen from 89% in 2012 and 90% in 2010. The consultants then went on to analyse what was driving the decline in satisfaction. They did this by asking how important a service is and how satisfied the community is with that service. The higher the gap, the less Council is performing to community expectation. So, for Rockdale in 2013 the largest gap between importance and satisfaction was for the provision and maintenance of public toilets. Other large gaps included Council's financial management; quality of new development and appropriateness of town planning controls.

Council was performing above expectation on provision of libraries; access to cycle paths and walking tracks; the monthly community newsletter and festivals and major events. This analysis can also be helpful in considering service levels.

The report also analysed that the top indicators that drove community satisfaction were:

- Reporting to the community on Council activities, services and facilities
- Transparent and accountable Council activities
- Council's financial management, and
- Community safety/Crime prevention
- Monthly newsletter
- Condition and maintenance of sporting fields, parks and gardens
- Quality of new development, and
- Opportunities to participate in Council decision making

The purpose of these columns is How to Get the Best out of our Councils, and it is important for there to be trust between a council and its local community. I have mentioned that I often receive feedback from members of the community and I thought I would share some of the feedback that I got recently about my column on Accountability – Integrated Planning and Reporting, that illustrated that there may be a trust challenge for Orange City Council if other residents feel the same way:

'If community members don't understand what Orange Council is accountable for then the achievements by council are measured by subjective measures, based on whether community members like individual Councillors rather than measurement based on the implementation of a Community Strategic Plan (CSP) to benefit all groups in the community.

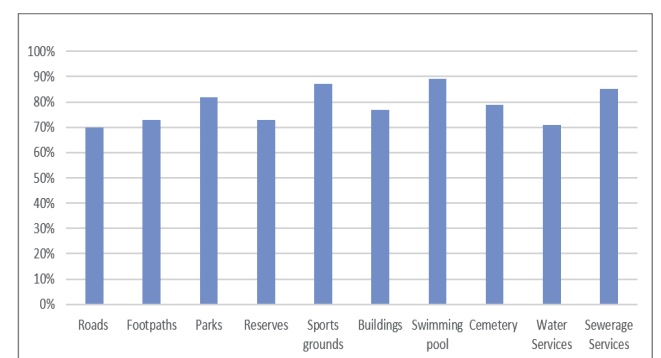
The key is good governance and the evidence you provided in the article clearly shows that there is a systemic flaw with the governance structure within Orange Council. You state that the Community Strategic Plan is a community plan based on social justice, equity, access and participation developed as a partnership between Council, State agencies, community groups and individuals. You further state this has never been achieved. So what you are saying is that true engagement has never occurred, rather this has been a bureaucratic process driven exercise with a plan that has been developed that is not measurable, and most likely unachievable without clear timeframes.

How can there be any accountability for the Council or Senior Staff when the interpretation of the assessment measures for the development plan include 'moving targets' in the CSP and the Delivery Program where goal posts can change within that Council term?'

I also used Community Satisfaction Surveys in Hay Shire to set baselines so that the Council could be accountable to the community on qualitative as well as quantitative measures of performance and progress.

For example, we asked the following questions about service levels for infrastructure and received the following responses of mostly high satisfaction so we could set baselines:

Figure 1 How satisfied are you with the service level



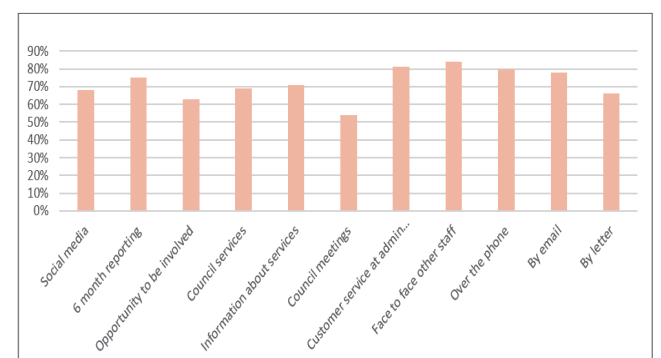
We also got some good feedback about customer service and where improvement was needed.

The questions were:

How satisfied are you with:

- The information Council puts on social media about Council's performance?
- The 6 monthly progress reporting on Council's Delivery Program?
- The opportunity to be involved in Council decision making?
- Council services?
- The information about Council and community services?
- If you have attended a Council meeting how satisfied were you with your experience?
- How satisfied are you with your experience of Council's customer service?
 - o Face to face at the front counter in the Admin centre
 - o Face to face with other Council staff
 - o Over the telephone
 - o By email
 - o By letter

Figure 2 How satisfied are you with



It was good to give feedback to staff that they received very high marks for customer service apart from by letter which needed considerable improvement, so we arranged training to improve letter writing capabilities. The lowest mark was for satisfaction with Council meetings and in some ways that may be inevitable as people are more likely to attend Council meetings if they are motivated by existing dissatisfaction.

I have received feedback that many people find these columns informative and I am happy to receive comments from readers about this column and other issues you would like me to cover so please either contact me at Orange City Life or aes@amandaspaldingconsulting.com