



2023 Focus Groups Feedback Report

Lead author: Chris Thornton
March 2023

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SUMMARY FINDINGS

This report summarises findings from the recent focus group engagement exercise with members of the East Renfrewshire Citizens' Panel. The focus groups built on the most recent 'core' Panel survey to explore survey findings in more detail. The survey identified a number of downward trends across key indicators such as:

- overall satisfaction with Council services;
- whether Council services are good value for money;
- satisfaction with East Renfrewshire as a place to live; and
- the extent to which members feel able to influence local decisions.

Focus groups sought to explore views on these issues in more detail, including what may be driving recent downward trends in these indicators.

The engagement exercise comprised of two discussion groups with Panel members, held in Barrhead Foundry and Giffnock Library. A small number of telephone interviews were also held with members who were unable to attend the groups. A total of 29 Panel members gave their views via the discussion groups and interviews.

This report provides an overview of feedback from these participants. Reflecting the format of discussion groups and interviews, findings are structured around (i) satisfaction with Council services, (ii) value for money, (iii) East Renfrewshire as a place to live, and (iv) influencing local decision making.

Satisfaction with Council services

Participants were first asked to consider how they felt about the quality of Council services. Feedback suggests that participants had a **generally positive overall impression** of Council services – it is notable that most participants had an initially positive reaction when asked what they think of East Renfrewshire Council.

Discussion also identified a number of specific perceived positives for Council services. These positives were most commonly focused on Council staff – described as polite, understanding and caring – and specific services such as education, social care and the Money Matters service. Some also suggested that East Renfrewshire Council services compare well with neighbouring areas, especially in relation to Education. These respondents noted that they have chosen to live in East Renfrewshire for much of their adult life in large part due to the quality of services.

While many participants had an initially positive reaction when asked about Council services, discussion groups also identified a range of **frustrations and negative perceptions** that may be contributing to falling satisfaction rates. For most participants these negative views appeared to be associated with the Council as an organisation, rather than specific services. This included some who noted that they have relatively little direct contact with Council services, other than universal services such as waste and recycling, and roads maintenance.

Several participants expressed frustration around the responsiveness of the Council as an organisation. This included examples difficulties accessing specific services by phone (i.e. beyond the main Council switchboard), and experience of calls not being returned when residents leave messages. Respondents also referred to cases where they had to make multiple contacts with the Council to resolve an issue; these experiences appeared to contribute to a view of the Council as inefficient and uncoordinated. Participants also referred to other issues which were seen as indicative of inefficiencies including delays addressing environment and cleanliness issues (in some cases this appeared to have been compounded by a lack of clarity on responsibility for specific environmental issues), delays to development and improvement projects, and use of 'patching' repairs to roads and housing (rather than more permanent fixes).

Other frustrations raised around the Council as an organisation included discussion of how **budgets are prioritised**. This indicates the potential impact of the recent budget consultation on how residents see the Council – discussion included reference to specific budget consultation proposals (such as potential closure of recycling facilities, potential closure of Council premises, and changes to the price of garden waste collection) and it was clear that some participants were well aware of the consultation.

Discussion of budget priorities also indicated concerns around longer-term pressures on Council budgets and services that appeared to be having an impact on perceptions of Council services. Some participants had a sense that the Council and local services have struggled with budget pressures and other challenges for a number of years, with reference to reduction in specific service standards and the introduction of charging for some services. Some noted that these pressures have been felt across Scotland, and suggested that East Renfrewshire has seen less significant service reductions than across other local authorities. For example, education and social care services were highlighted as positives where local services were seen as superior to other parts of the country. Nevertheless, discussion groups suggest that these longer term pressures have had an impact on overall satisfaction with Council services.

In the shorter term, feedback also suggests that the **COVID-19 pandemic** has had a significant impact on service satisfaction for some. Discussion noted that many services had 'gone above and beyond' to support vulnerable residents during lockdown periods at the height of the pandemic, and participants were very positive in their views of these services. However, there was also some frustration around examples of specific services which some felt had not fully recovered from the pandemic, including appointments for in-person service contacts, access to recycling centres, opening hours for some community facilities, and the responsiveness of housing repairs. This frustration appeared to compound the wider view that budget pressures have eroded the standard of local services over a number of years, pre-dating the impact of COVID-19.

Some participants referred to **specific service areas** where standards were seen as having reduced in recent years, and which contributed to a negative view of the Council. These were most commonly related to roads maintenance and environmental services, although some also raised concerns around how the Council deals with antisocial behaviour and noise complaints. The condition of roads was a

consistent concern across all participants, while concerns around environment services appeared to be linked to a view (discussed later in relation to views of ER as a place to live) that the condition and appearance of some areas has been 'neglected'. This included some participants for whom concerns around roads and the local environment appeared to have a disproportionate impact on their view of the Council, for example where individuals little direct contact with specific Council services.

Value for money of Council services

Survey results have shown some decrease over recent years in the proportion of Panel members who feel that East Renfrewshire Council services are good value for money. Discussion groups suggest that this may be linked to decreasing satisfaction with Council services.

Some remained positive about **how East Renfrewshire Council services compare with other local authorities**, and this appeared to contribute to more positive views on value for money of local services. However, several of the concerns discussed earlier around the standard of local services translated into more negative value for money perceptions. For example, several participants referred to service standards reducing as a result of budget pressures, when asked to consider value for money. The condition of roads and local environment was also a consistent theme, and had a clear impact on value for money judgements for some participants.

Concerns around **roads and the environment** appeared to have a significant impact on views for those who have little direct contact with Council services. Several respondents noted that they made little use of Council services, and as such found it difficult to draw a direct link between costs and 'tangible' benefits provided by Council services. In contrast, it was notable that value for money judgements were most positive for participants with experience of specific services such as education, social care and housing services.

East Renfrewshire as a place to live

As was the case in relation to the standard of Council services, participants' initial reaction was generally positive when asked to consider East Renfrewshire as a place to live. Several participants noted that many of the **positives that attracted them to the area** still apply, including reference to particular Council services such as education and social care services as points of pride for local communities. This included participants expressing particular pride around how the standard of education services (including provision for children with additional support needs) compares with other parts of Scotland.

Libraries were also highlighted by some as a positive for East Renfrewshire. There appeared to be a view that the area has avoided the level of cuts to library services seen across some other local authorities, with some noting the important role that libraries continue to play for local communities. This included use of libraries as warm spaces during the current cost of living crisis.

A **sense of community and belonging** was also highlighted as a particular positive for some. Having family and friends in the area was identified as a key factor for many participants choosing to stay in East Renfrewshire. Relationships with neighbours and others in their local neighbourhood were also seen as a positive for the area, with some suggesting that experience during the pandemic had strengthened the sense of community in their local area. This included reference to more time spent speaking with neighbours, including as a result of taking more outdoor exercise during the pandemic, and to communication channels (such as WhatsApp groups) established during the pandemic that have remained active. Some suggested that this sense of community had reduced somewhat as more local residents have returned to the workplace, but participants expressed a real desire for the increased sense of community to be maintained as far as possible

Others expressed a less positive view around the sense of community in their local area. A small number of participants felt that they know fewer of their neighbours than was the case when they first moved to the area (for some this period covered several decades). Changes to the mix of housing provision was seen by some as having contributed to a reduced sense of community, including a view that new housing development has been too focused on large, high value housing (at the expense of family homes and smaller, more affordable options), and that increasing numbers of private lets can undermine the connection between residents and the local area. There was also reference to a potential increase in difficulties with neighbours and antisocial behaviour during the pandemic, and it was clear that this had a significant impact on how those affected feel about their local area as a place to live.

Participants also highlighted **local community organisations** as having a potentially important role in supporting a sense of community, including reference to their role in addressing issues such as loneliness and isolation. There was some concern around examples of local groups or activities that have not fully recovered from the pandemic, and a view that this could undermine work maintain a sense of local community. Some suggested that challenges in meeting safety requirements earlier in the recovery period may have prevented some groups from returning, but there was also concern that limited access to halls and venues for local community groups could be a barrier to their recovery. Discussion identified potential for the Council to better support local community organisations, for example by raising awareness of available activities and encouraging more residents to start or contribute to community groups.

Participants also highlighted the importance of the **quality of local environment**, including access to green spaces, for their experience of East Renfrewshire as a place to live. Some noted that access to green spaces had become particularly important for them during the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggested that this had contributed to a more positive view of their local neighbourhood as a place to live. However, some also expressed concern that green spaces are being eroded by the pace of housing development in some parts of East Renfrewshire, and this was linked to a more negative view of the area as a place to live.

In terms of the quality of local neighbourhoods, as noted earlier some of the more negative views expressed around Council services appeared to be linked to a perception that the quality and cleanliness of local neighbourhoods has deteriorated

in recent years. This included a view that some parts of East Renfrewshire appear to be better maintained than others, especially in relation to the standard of open and green spaces. Some linked this to negative perceptions of specific Council services such as roads repairs and environmental services.

A perceived deterioration of **public transport** services also appears to have contributed to some dissatisfaction with East Renfrewshire as a place to live. A number of participants referred to recent and planned loss of specific public transport services, some having organised petitions opposed to these. Some suggested that cuts to public transport services could have a significant impact on local communities, particularly for older residents with limited mobility.

Influencing local decision making

In addition to the discussion around sense of community noted above, the extent to which residents feel able to influence local decisions also emerged as key factor in how individuals feel about their local neighbourhood.

Several participants indicated that they felt **positively about their ability to influence local decision making**, with this often linked to experience of specific exercises or community organisations. In addition to experience of having participating in Council consultation exercises (including the recent budget consultation), examples included having organised petitions and local community consultations, and contributing to local representative groups such as Community Councils.

However, discussion groups also identified some frustration around **the extent to which the Council takes account of resident views in its decision making**. This appeared to be primarily linked to concerns that residents are not able to genuinely influence local decisions; even where participants referred to having contributed to specific consultation exercises, there was some scepticism around the extent to which these exercises had a genuine impact on Council decisions. Some participants appeared to regard processes such as the recent budget consultation as ‘tick box exercises’, and it was suggested that this view could limit residents’ willingness to take part in exercises.

Participants expressed a desire for **‘more meaningful’ consultation exercises**. This included calls for more participatory consultation processes where residents have an opportunity to shape proposals, rather than exercises which some saw as residents being asked to ‘rubber stamp’ decisions that had already been taken. Some also suggested that more effective communication could help more residents to feel that they are able to influence local decision making. There was a view that the Council could be more effective in sharing how resident views and feedback have been taken into account by the decision making process.

Improving perceptions of East Renfrewshire Council

Discussion groups closed with participants being asked to suggest one or more ways in which East Renfrewshire Council could improve perceptions of the Council as an organisation, and of Council services. It was notable that some participants found it

difficult to make specific, concrete suggestions. In some cases this appeared to reflect an understanding of the significant challenges facing the Council; when asked to suggest changes, some reiterated their concerns around the extent to which Council services could resist the effects of budget constraints.

Nevertheless, participants did suggest several specific changes that could help to improve perceptions:

- Some wished to see **improvements focused on specific services**, most commonly roads maintenance. There were also calls for the Council to do more to support and improve public transport services (especially bus services), to improve access to electric vehicle charging, and to support better access to housing options that are affordable and meet the range of local housing needs. Several participants also wished to see investment to maintain the standard of key services such as education.
- Several participants saw a need for targeted investment to **improve the quality of environment** in some parts of East Renfrewshire. This included calls for improved access to good quality green space, and to improved cleanliness for example through campaigns to raise awareness of local residents' role in maintaining the quality and appearance of their local neighbourhoods. Some also saw a need for better access to shops and leisure activities in some parts of East Renfrewshire.
- Others referred to a need for **greater transparency** around decision making, including improvements in how effectively the Council shares how residents' views are taken into account.
- Participants also wished to see the Council being **more open to resident views and feedback**, and more willing to acknowledge where the organization or specific services have not met expectations. This included calls for more opportunities for individuals to provide meaningful feedback. Elected member surgeries were identified as a potential opportunity for the Council to be more open to local residents.
- There was also a perceived need to **raise awareness of community-based activities**, and a role for the Council in encouraging and facilitating more residents to start or contribute to community groups. These were seen as key ways in which the Council could help to build a stronger sense of community.