

Aspects of
Local Government
Performance

**a study of
public attitudes
within the
Whangarei District**

commissioned by B. MacLachlan

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Client brief

With an impending local body election two months out, this measurement was designed to establish public attitudes toward a number of contentious civic issues as well as review the performance of councils broader responsibilities within the framework of democratic process.

In particular, this survey sought information in the areas of arts promotion, Okara Park re-development, councils' interactive communication / consultation processes, rating evaluation and the Whangarei District Council's level of financial indebtedness.

Note

It is a given that the general public are rarely, if ever, aware of the micro detail surrounding either specific issues or the legislative / council culture influences that effect decision making.

Acknowledging that, it is still axiomatic that outcomes visible to the public will be the influences dictating their personal attitudes toward council performance and also their choice of action at election time.

Methodology

In order to better comprehend a sample universe within the defined district boundaries for the purpose of refining local attitudes, the client required the survey be confined within a stipulated ward inside the Whangarei District. Further, to restrict the responses to individuals who had a previous voting record, in order to further sharpen the focus of the study.

A random sampling technique was employed using an electoral roll (post voting copy) of the ward selected and combined with the Northland Telephone Directory – Whangarei section, as reference.

Telephone interviews were conducted between 4 August 2007 and 11 August 2007, unanswered calls were repeated twice before abandonment.

The sample (n) size was 300 and the margin of error was $\pm 3.1\%$.

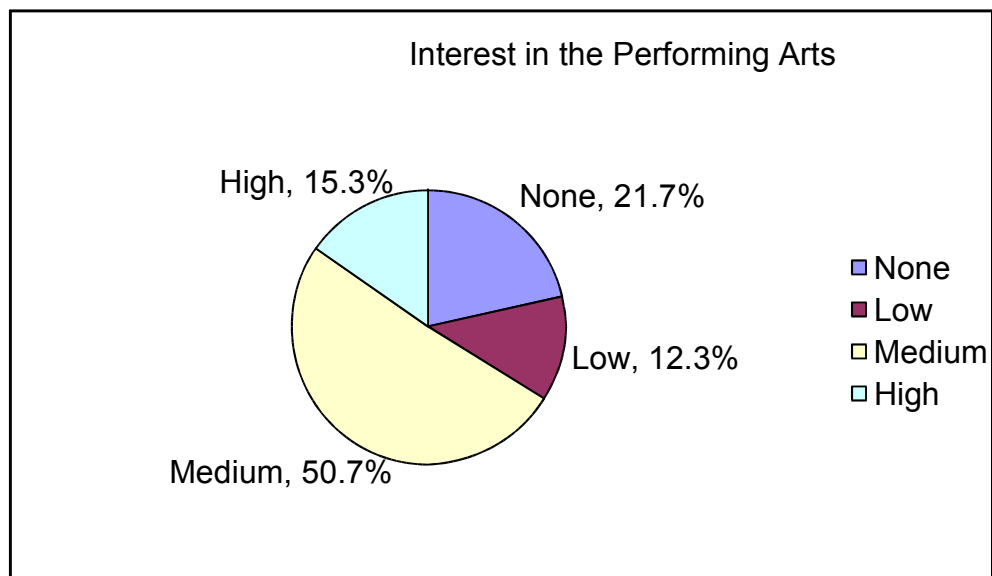
Findings

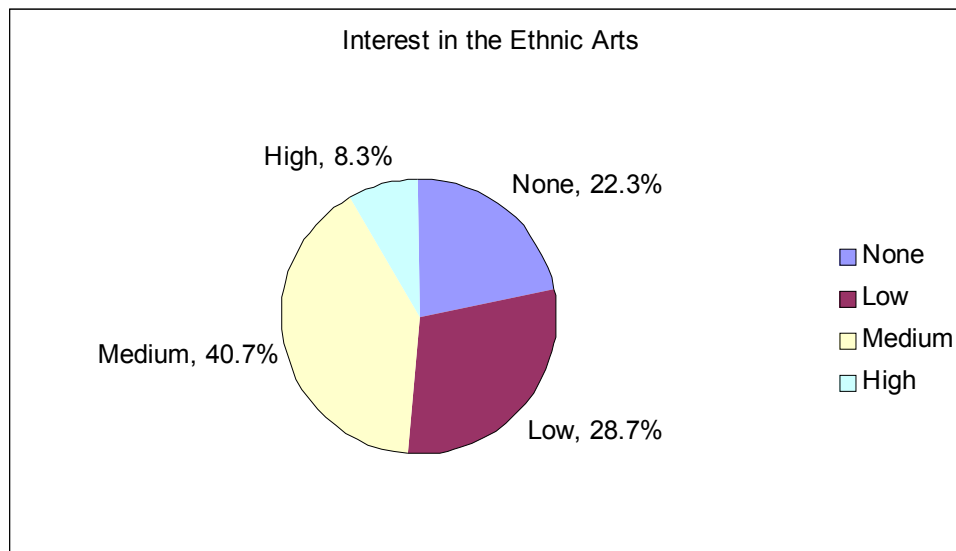
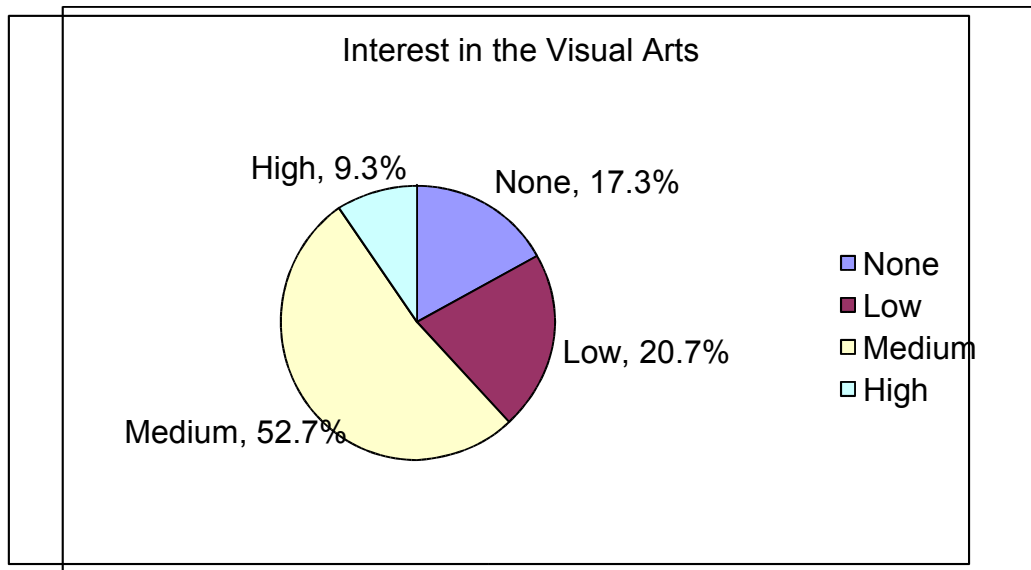
Question 1.

'Arts interest & involvement'

TABLE I

Interest Level	Public Rate	Performing Arts			Visual Arts			Ethnic Arts		
	0	65	21.7%	21.7%	52	17.3%	17.3%	67	22.3%	22.3%
LOW	1	12	4.0%	12.3%	13	4.3%	20.7%	16	5.3%	28.7%
	2	13	4.3%		31	10.3%		29	9.7%	
	3	12	4.0%		18	6.0%		41	13.7%	
MEDIUM	4	18	6.0%	50.7%	27	9.0%	52.7%	24	8.0%	40.7%
	5	85	28.3%		78	26.0%		61	20.3%	
	6	15	5.0%		27	9.0%		23	7.7%	
HIGH	7	34	11.3%	15.3%	26	8.7%	9.3%	14	4.7%	8.3%
	8	36	12.0%		18	6.0%		15	5.0%	
	9	2	0.7%		0	0.0%		1	0.3%	
	10	8	2.7%		10	3.3%		9	3.0%	
totals		300	100.0%	100.0%	300	100.0%		300	100.0%	





Comment

Note : For the purpose of looking at interest / involvement groupings on the 10 point scale, the levels 1 – 3 are defined as "LOW INTEREST", levels 4 – 7 as "MEDIUM INTEREST" and levels 8 – 10 as "HIGH INTEREST".

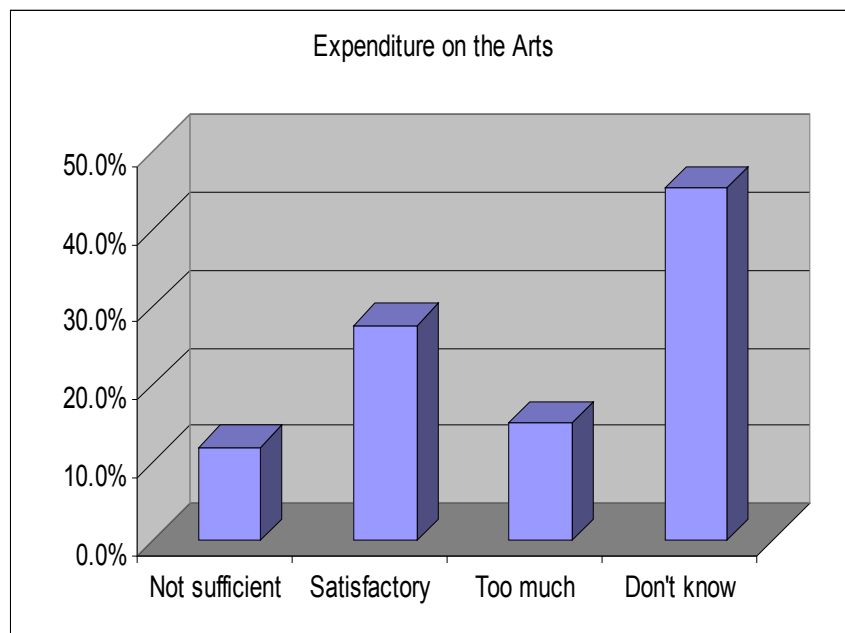
The table above indicates that 'NO' & "LOW" levels for Performing Arts, Visual Arts & Ethnic Cultural Arts had interest levels of 34.0%, 37.9% and 51.1% respectively. Similarly the "MEDIUM INTEREST" for the same three art forms was 50.6%, 52.7% and 40.6% respectively. The "HIGH INTEREST" levels were 15.4%, 9.4% and 8.3% respectively.

With the 'Performing Arts' and 'Visual Arts' the mid point (5) was the highest ranking point. In the case of 'Ethnic', the highest individual ranking was in the category of "NO INTEREST" .

Question 2.

'Council art investment'**TABLE II**

Option		
"NOT SUFFICIENT"	36	12.0%
"SATISFACTORY"	83	27.7%
"TOO MUCH"	45	15.0%
"DON'T KNOW"	136	45.3%
total	300	100.0%



Comment

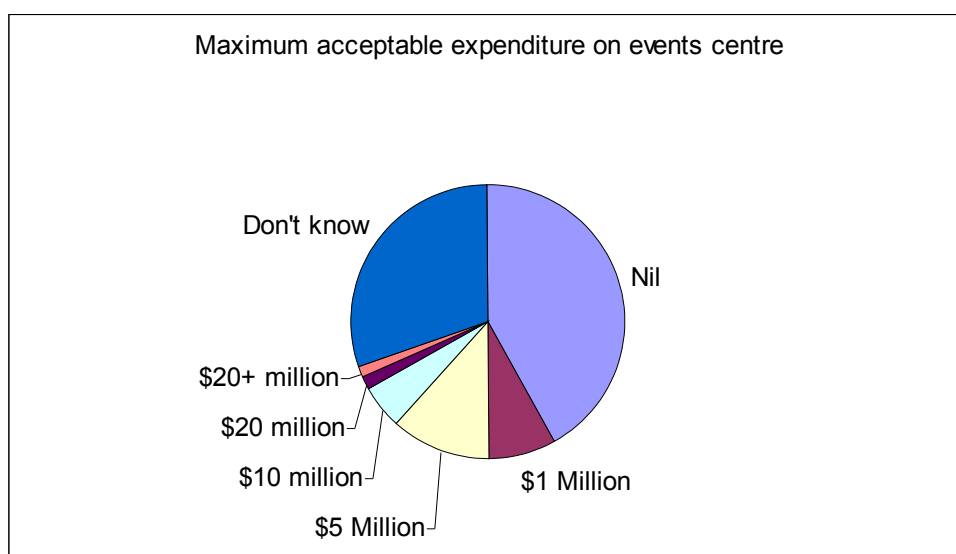
Nearly half of all respondents (45.3%) indicated they held no views on the subject of Whangarei District Council's spending on the Arts [see reference in "Conclusions" section].

The middle group of "Satisfactory" was the second highest ranking of 27.7%. There was no significant difference between the "Not Sufficient" at 12.0% and the "Too Much" at 15.0%.

Question 3.

'Events Centre contribution levels'TABLE III

Options		
NIL	126	42.0%
\$1 MILLION	23	7.7%
\$5 MILLION	35	11.7%
\$10 MILLION	16	5.3%
\$20 MILLION	5	1.7%
\$20+ MILLION	3	1.0%
"DON'T KNOW"	92	30.7%
total	300	100.0%



Comment

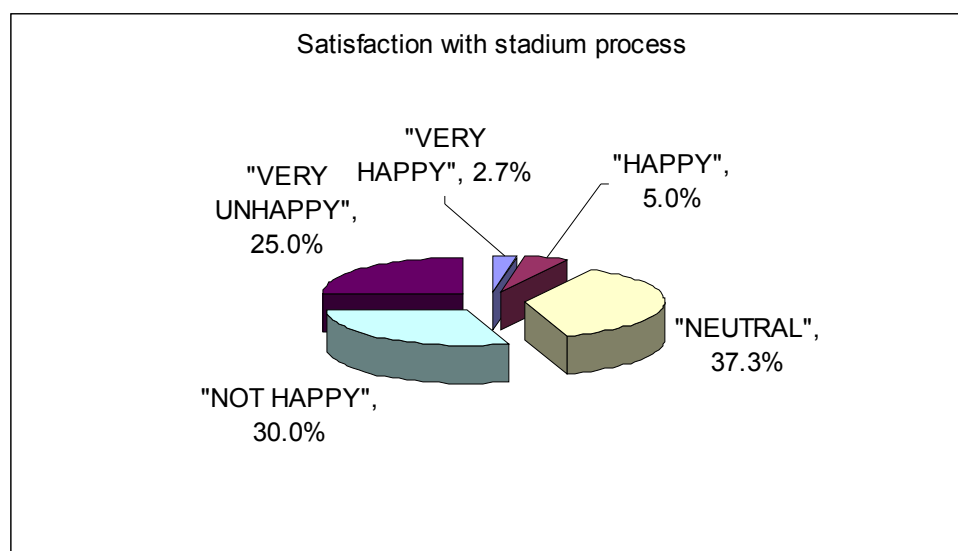
The most favoured ratepayer contribution by a considerable margin was "NIL" (42.0%), followed by the option of a \$5million contribution (11.7%). The "Don't Know" (or don't care) level of response was relatively high at 30.6%.

Note *The question specifically asked for a a "Satisfactory level of expenditure by ratepayers" as distinct from which council provided what funding.*

Question 4.

'Stadium process satisfaction'TABLE IV

Status	Satisfaction with stadium process	
"VERY HAPPY"	2.7%	8
"HAPPY"	5.0%	15
"NEUTRAL"	37.3%	112
"NOT HAPPY"	30.0%	90
"VERY UNHAPPY"	25.0%	75
total	100.0%	300

Comment

7.7% of respondents were "Very Happy" or "Happy". On the other end of the scale 55.0% of them were "Very Unhappy" or "Unhappy".

37.3% had no thoughts either way.

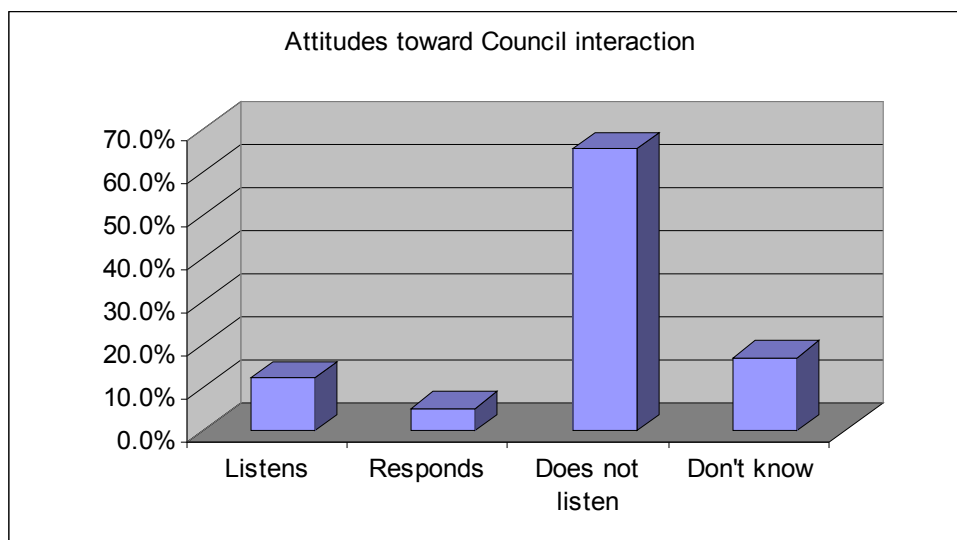
note : The mid point of the five point scale emphasised the term 'Neutral' in order to capture those uncommitted as well as those who fell in the customary "Don't know" category.

Question 5.

'Interactive democracy'

TABLE V

Options		
"LISTENS"	37	12.3%
"RESPONDS"	16	5.3%
"NOT LISTEN"	196	65.3%
"DON'T KNOW"	51	17.0%
total	300	100.0%



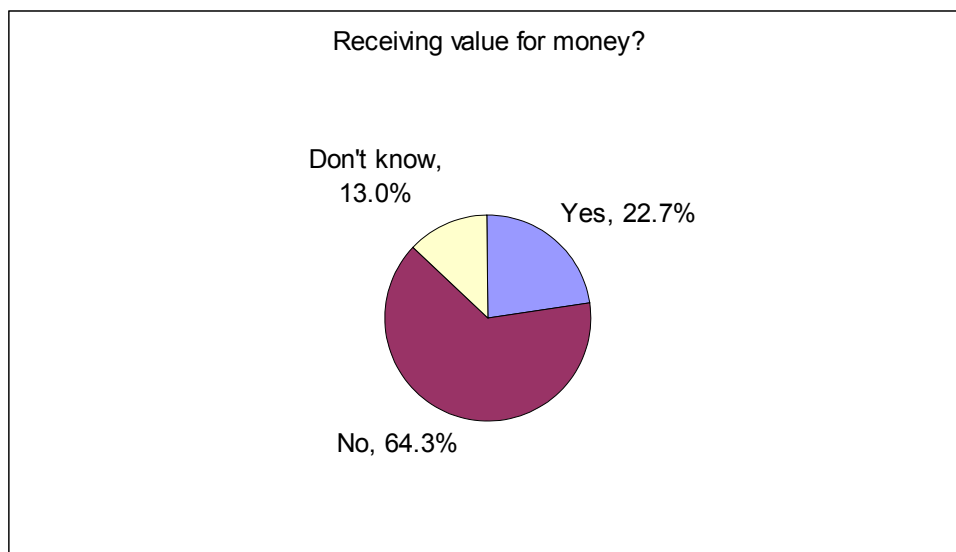
Comment

Approximately two thirds of the respondents thought that Councils (plural) "Tend not to listen" (65.3%). The next significant segment thought that Councils "Listen to the public" (12.3%). The lowest response was the segment who thought Councils "Respond" to public input (5.3%).

Question 6.

'Value for money – Rates'TABLE VI

Option		
"YES"	68	22.7%
"NO"	193	64.3%
"DON'T KNOW"	39	13.0%
total	300	100.0%

Comment

At a ratio of nearly 3 : 1 those surveyed considered they were not getting value for their rates money.

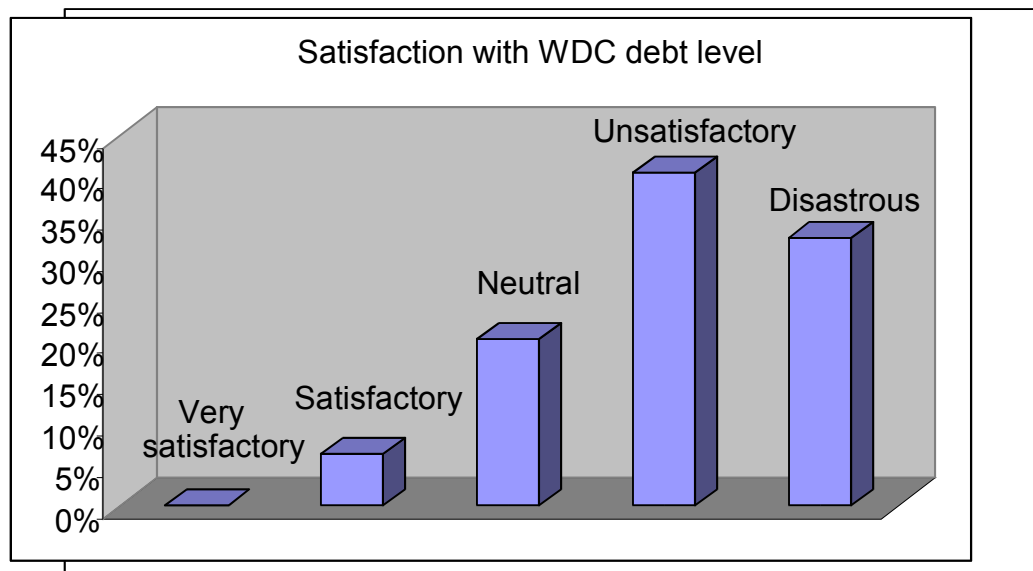
The polarisation on this topic is reinforced by a moderately low factor of respondents in the "Don't Know" category at 13.0%.

Question 7.

'Debt level of W.D.C.'

TABLE VII

Satisfaction level		
"VERY SATISFACTORY"	0	0
"SATISFACTORY"	19	6.3%
"NEUTRAL"	61	20.3%
"UNSATISFACTORY"	122	40.7%
"DISASTEROUS"	98	32.7%
total	300	100.0%

Comments

At the ends of the 'satisfaction' spectrum, the negative end - "Disastrous" was an opinion held by 32.7% of respondents, whilst at the other end nobody was "Very Satisfied". Overall three quarters (73.4%) of the sample thought that the W.D.C. debt level was either "Unsatisfactory" or "Disastrous". 20.3% of respondents

either had no opinion or were neither negative or positive on the debt topic, leaving 6.3% who were "Satisfied" with the situation.

Conclusions

1.0 It would be extremely unlikely that any organisation or local body has gone to the trouble or expense in recent years to acquaint themselves with the interest / involvement levels of the Whangarei public in respect of the art scene.

1.1 The data obtained from Whangarei respondents in Q.1 of this survey shows very significant low levels of interest in the three basic art categories investigated. Over one third of those questioned had either "NO" or "LOW" interest and / or involvement in the Performing and Visual art areas and 51% had "NO" or "LOW" interest levels in any of the Ethnic arts.

1.2 Relevant to the provision of public amenities and art promotion is the "High" end of the interest / involvement range, where the Performing arts recorded the highest ranking at 15.3%, followed by 9.3% for the Visual arts and 8.3% for Ethnic art forms. Taking an average across these three extrapolates to approximately 11% of our current district population over the age of 18 (in the order of 6,000) who are very interested in both the quality of local facilities and the programmes conducted in them.

1.3 In Table II it is no coincidence that 12.0% of responses indicated that Council funding was "Not Sufficient" when viewed in the context of the 11% referred to in the previous paragraph. Similarly there is a strong link between the "Medium" interest levels

in Table I and the 45.3% who are in the "Don't Know" category in Table II.

2.0 One of Whangarei's more contentious issues in recent years, the Okara Park development continues to polarise the local community. Questions 3 & 4 deal with the public perceptions in relation to (a) funding and (b) councils processes.

2.1 By asking respondents the acceptable rates money expenditure on the project, clearly separated the 'fors' and 'against'. While the anti-development group responded at approaching the 50% level, the moderates could probably be aggregated in the next two "\$" categories of \$1 & 5 million, which constituted 19.4% with the remainder, in favour of spending, who indicated a defined dollar value in the 8.0% result.

2.2 In many respects, it is thought provoking, that combining the "Nil" contribution, on an arbitrary basis, with the 'moderates', gives 61.4% of responses in favour of nothing or a token gesture. Moving to the level of public satisfaction (Table IV), with councils process procedures, the "Not Happy" and "Very Unhappy" combined response aggregates at 55%.

2.3 The "Don't Knows" in Table III and the "Neutrals" in Table IV are strikingly close in their respective ratings.

3.0 The topic of 'Interactive Democracy' is a recent catchphrase, but would seem to adequately sum up the basic principles involved in any form of duly elected government i.e. the free flow of two directional information between constituents and the elected body. Question 5 deals with the receptiveness of local councils as distinct

from consultative or communication skills on the part of those bodies.

The distinction is clearly phrased in the survey question as it speaks only of councils response attitudes in hearing public needs and requirements.

3.1 Overwhelmingly the Whangarei constituency is saying that councils disregard the public voice, with nearly two thirds (65.3%) convinced that councils are deaf. This may, to some extent, be influenced by the recent rejection, by both councils, of a public petition requesting a referendum on the desire to proceed with the Okara Park Events Centre.

4.0 Once again a significant majority of the constituency thought that councils were not acting in their best interest. This time in respect of property rates covered in Question 6. 64.3% of all respondents indicated that they did not consider they received value for money by way of the rates paid in the district.

4.1 The discontent has been partly fueled by P.R. releases quoting the Mayor drawing attention to other New Zealand districts increases which were as high or higher. This approach apparently backfired with some councillors and the media taking issue with the correctness of Her Worship's figures. Irrespective of the accuracy of statements on the subject, the very size of the W.D.C. increase over the previous year figure, brought a sharp critical focus to the issue.

5.0 The final question asked the public to rank their level of satisfaction with the present W.D.C. amount of corporate debt. The maximum guidelines for which have been increased during the last

three years by agreement between Council and it's merchant bankers (!)

5.1 This question (Q.7) also plumbed the extent of public anguish and added another issue to the negative outlook of constituents in the district. Although few members of the public are aware of ratios relating to capital value versus debt burden etc., it is apparent that having a rough idea of Council's annual expenditure, they see the size of the debt to be greater than any single year's income. Relating that to fiscal prudence on a personal or corporate balance sheet leaves them annoyed and worried with Council performance. Saying that nearly three quarters of the respondents were disturbed is probably a major understatement.

In summary, this measurement has touched a voter nerve at several points in relation to some of the topical issues. At a democratic process level, where respondents have been shaken by seemingly indifferent council / s, it would appear the public sees an out of control situation developing in local governance by their elected representatives.