

progressive

Scottish Fiscal Commission

Stakeholder consultation: presentation of findings

July 2018



Project objectives



Provide measurement of attitudes and perceptions

Measure performance

Rate publications

Rate brand assets such as website/social media/events

Set benchmark for performance measures

What did we do?

Two stages of research



Qualitative research (stage one):

- 20 in-depth interviews with stakeholders.
- Randomly selected with the exclusion of MSPs.
- The contact rate was very successful with few refusals.
- Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.
- Discussions were guided by a topic guide that was agreed with the client before hand.
- Findings input into the design of the quantitative interview used in stage two of this research (online survey of stakeholders).
- Fieldwork dates were between 8th February and 5th March



Quantitative research (stage two):

- Online survey with stakeholders, designed to gain clear measures of issues arising from the qualitative stage and to set a benchmark for future surveys.
- Quantitative approach:
 - Questionnaire designed in collaboration with SFC
 - Content of questionnaire informed by outputs from first stage qualitative research
 - Link to structured questionnaire sent to full list of stakeholders, 142 contacts in total, supplied by SFC
 - 40% response rate resulting in sample of 57
 - Margins of error are between 2.58% and 12.98% calculated at the 95% confidence level
 - The sample size is very small and so caution should be applied when interpreting the results
 - Fieldwork dates were between April 26th to May 9th 2018

What did we find out?



With the **qualitative research**, we explored:

- Understanding of SFC and relationships with them
- Views on the quality of SFC service provision, including expectations, SFC forecasts and other publications, and SFC staff
- Views and perceptions of the four key SFC values and SFC's performance in relation to them
- Thoughts on whether and how SFC should build awareness of the organisations and its role



With the **quantitative online survey**, we focused on measuring:

- Perceptions of SFC and their performance, including core values and performance of SFC staff,
- Quality of forecasts and other SFC publications
- Performance of SFC brand assets and how they could be improved (website, social media, and events)



Notes on the quantitative data analysis:

Only **statistically significant** differences are reported

Statistically significant differences between sub-groups on charts are noted with



Where base sizes are low a caution sign is shown. **These results must be read with caution**

Where figures do not add to 100% this is due to multi-coded responses or rounding

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Overall



- Perceptions of SFC are overwhelmingly positive. SFC is widely trusted and respected.
- That said, it should be borne in mind that these are benchmark results and SFC in its current form is still new and establishing its reputation. Perceptions may change as stakeholders gain more experience of working with SFC.
- Staff were praised for their professional expertise and knowledge, and also their responsiveness, approachability and accessibility.
- Stakeholders were generally positive about SFC's performance against the four key values (Trust, Independence, Efficiency and Expertise)
- SFC's publications were rated highly across a range of criteria.
- The latest economic and fiscal forecast was well received and seen as an improvement on forecasts issued prior to the change in SFC's status to an independent body. However, the main test for stakeholders will be how accurate the forecast turns out to be in the months ahead.
- Email is the preferred method of communication with SFC. Most people were unable to comment on SFC's social media presence, but in the survey, those who did tended to think the social media presence was 'about right'.
- The website is a potential area for improvement – although most rated it as at least 'good' on all measures, only a fairly small minority rated it as 'very good', the top rating.

Perceptions and performance



Expectations



- Responses point to Scottish Fiscal Commission meeting respondents' expectations.

Accurate Reliable
Communicate well Neutral Accuracy of data
Clear reporting Honest
Technical ability
Independent

Qualities of Service Delivery



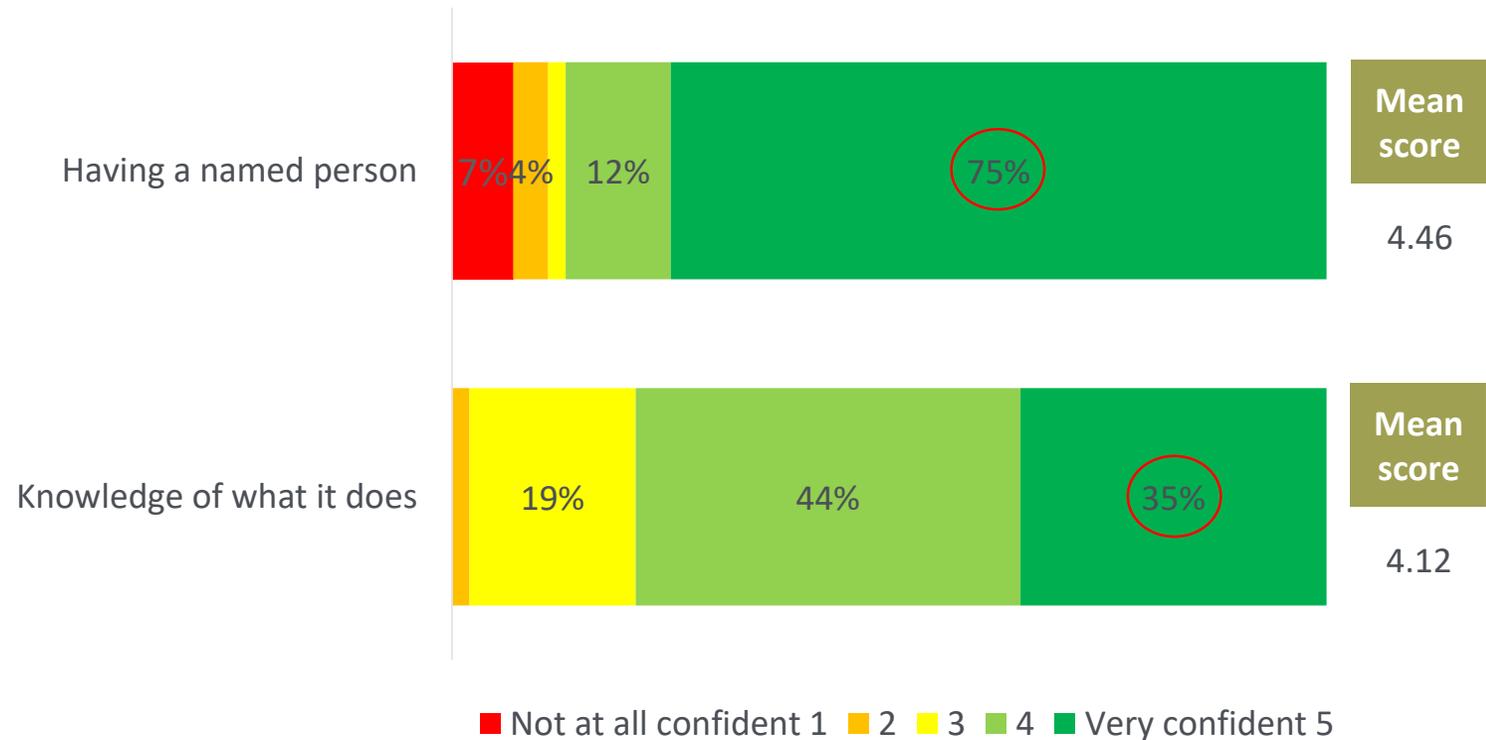
- The quality of Scottish Fiscal Commission's work was described in very complimentary terms.
- It was not uncommon to hear respondents say the quality of forecasts have been improved by SFC since becoming a non-Ministerial Department and there was a sense that they may be more reliable now.
- The only suggestions for improvement were:
 - To go further into the future with forecasting
 - To get media support (although people do a very good job)
 - When commissioners present forecasts it is difficult for them to articulate technical points

Levels of confidence

- Respondents were highly confident in their knowledge of having a named person they could contact at SFC.
- Those who worked for larger organisations (>1000 employees) had slightly more confidence in having a named person when compared to those from smaller organisations up to 1,000, (4.61 compared to 4.30).
- Respondents were less confident in their knowledge of what SFC does.
- Those who worked for larger organisations (>1000 employees) had slightly more confidence in understanding what SFC does when compared to those from smaller organisations up to 1,000, (4.30 compared to 4.03).
- The difference across the two overall mean scores shown is not significant however there was a significantly higher percentage of respondents who were very confident in having a named person. .



Named person and knowledge of what SFC does



On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very confident and 5 is not at all confident, how confident are you in your knowledge of what SFC does?/having a named person you could contact at SFC?

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is not at all confidents and 5 is very confident

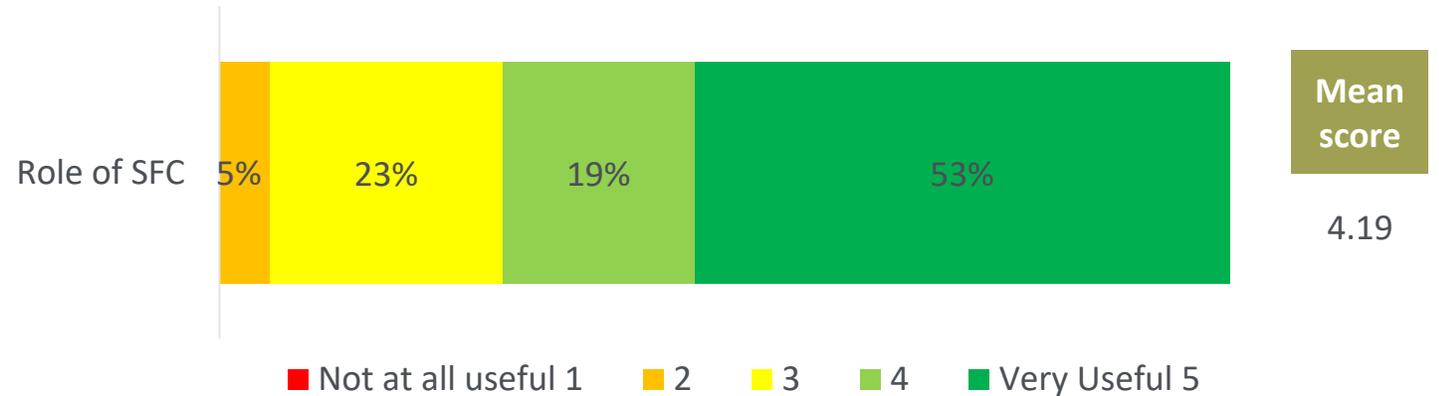


SFC role

- SFC is seen by the majority 72% as being useful.
- Those in government departments (23%) were the least likely of all other job roles to say very useful.
- Those in roles of researchers (80%) and official non-departmental government body (80%) were the most likely to say very useful.



Levels of usefulness



On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very useful and 5 is not at all useful, how useful do you consider SFC's role to be?

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is not at all useful and 5 is very useful

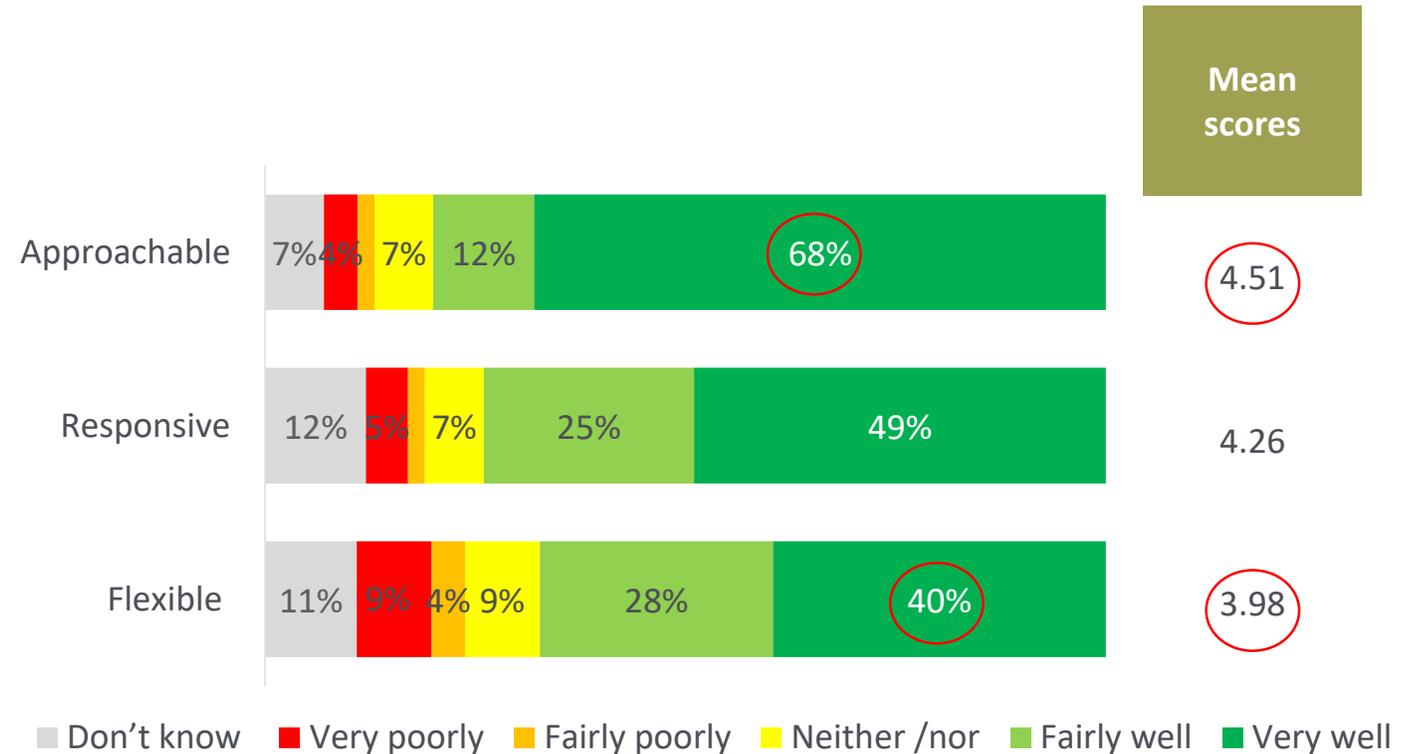


Performance

- Staff were given very high ratings for being approachable with 80% of the sample saying they performed well against this criteria. The percentage of those saying very well for being approachable and the overall mean score were significantly higher than the ratings for being flexible.
- 74% of respondents said staff performed well in terms of being responsive.
- 68% of respondents said staff performed well in terms of being flexible but 13% said fairly or very poorly.
- There were no significant differences across sub-groups.



Staff performance

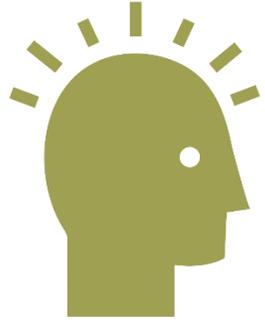


How well or poorly do SFC staff perform in terms of being:

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is very poorly and 10 is very well.

Base (all) 57

Values



SFC values



- Respondents were asked to assess the SFC's performance, based on their own experience and perceptions, against the four key values which summarises those identified by SFC as central to their work and ethos:
 - Trust
 - Independence
 - Expertise
 - Efficiency
- Overall, respondents rated the SFC highly on all these values, although there was a sense that the SFC is new and it will take time to fully assess their performance.
- Respondents who worked most closely with the SFC (mostly those in the Scottish Government) were generally able, to speak in more detail about their perceptions, based on greater experience.
- Respondents were largely positive about SFC's performance against these values. There were one or two examples given where the working relationship had not quite gone to plan. However, these were seen as minor, and in the context of a very good relationship overall.

SFC values: Trust



- Respondents overwhelmingly viewed the SFC as trustworthy and authoritative, and had faith in the forecasts and figures it produces. This trust partly rested on their perceptions of SFC as truly independent.
- For those who had working relationships with SFC, they had a high level of trust in the individual SFC staff they work with. They rated SFC highly on openness and accessibility to enquiries.
- Whilst there were no negative comments in relation to trustworthiness, some respondents pointed out that the SFC is still a new organisation in its current form, and that the level of trust will grow over time as SFC becomes more established.
- SFC publications were also well trusted, with *Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecast* from December 2017 especially highly regarded.
- A number of respondents praised the SFC for being transparent and open on how their estimates are made and the models and methodologies used.
- The SFC was widely regarded as a trustworthy partner for sharing sensitive information. Not all respondents have shared information, however, so acknowledge that they cannot speak from experience.

SFC values: Independence



- SFC was clearly understood as being an independent organisation. Some pointed out that they need to work closely with the Scottish Government, but they were understood as being a separate body, not a part of SG.
- Doubt over SFC independence was questioned by one respondent who was slightly concerned about the number of staff that have recently come over from government, the physical proximity to Government and the *challenge meetings* where no one knows what weight the Government might hold.
- As well as understanding that the SFC is constituted as an independent body, respondents' perceptions tended to be that they are in practice independent, although some pointed out they did not have the evidence or depth of experience with the SFC to support this perception.
- There was some awareness that true independence is something that the SFC will need to work actively to maintain – independence is not a given, even though that is how the SFC is constituted.
- For example, one respondent pointed out that the 2014 independence referendum divided economists along pro- and anti-independence lines. This faultline persists, and the SFC must work to maintain its independence in this context.
- Another pointed out that the SFC is not self-funding, and that this should be understood as a potential limit to its independence.
- Generally the SFC was seen as good at communicating its independence amongst people with an interest in forecasting, but there is still some way to go until they are understood by the wider public. There was a sense that OBR is now gaining some traction with the public as an independent forecaster.

SFC values: Expertise



- The SFC's expertise was not in doubt amongst respondents. They were highly regarded as experts in what they do.
- This was linked strongly to perceptions of their staff amongst those who have direct dealings with them. Staff were frequently praised as intelligent, knowledgeable and expert.
- SFC staff were also praised as being quick to learn if they are working in an area of which they have less previous knowledge, and were recognised by some for building up a lot of knowledge and expertise in a short space of time.
- Beyond their immediate roles, some highlighted how SFC staff have a good grasp of wider policy contexts and a good understanding of their remit.
- At least one respondent singled out the SFC leadership for praise, highlighting that good governance should filter down through the organisation.

SFC values: Efficiency



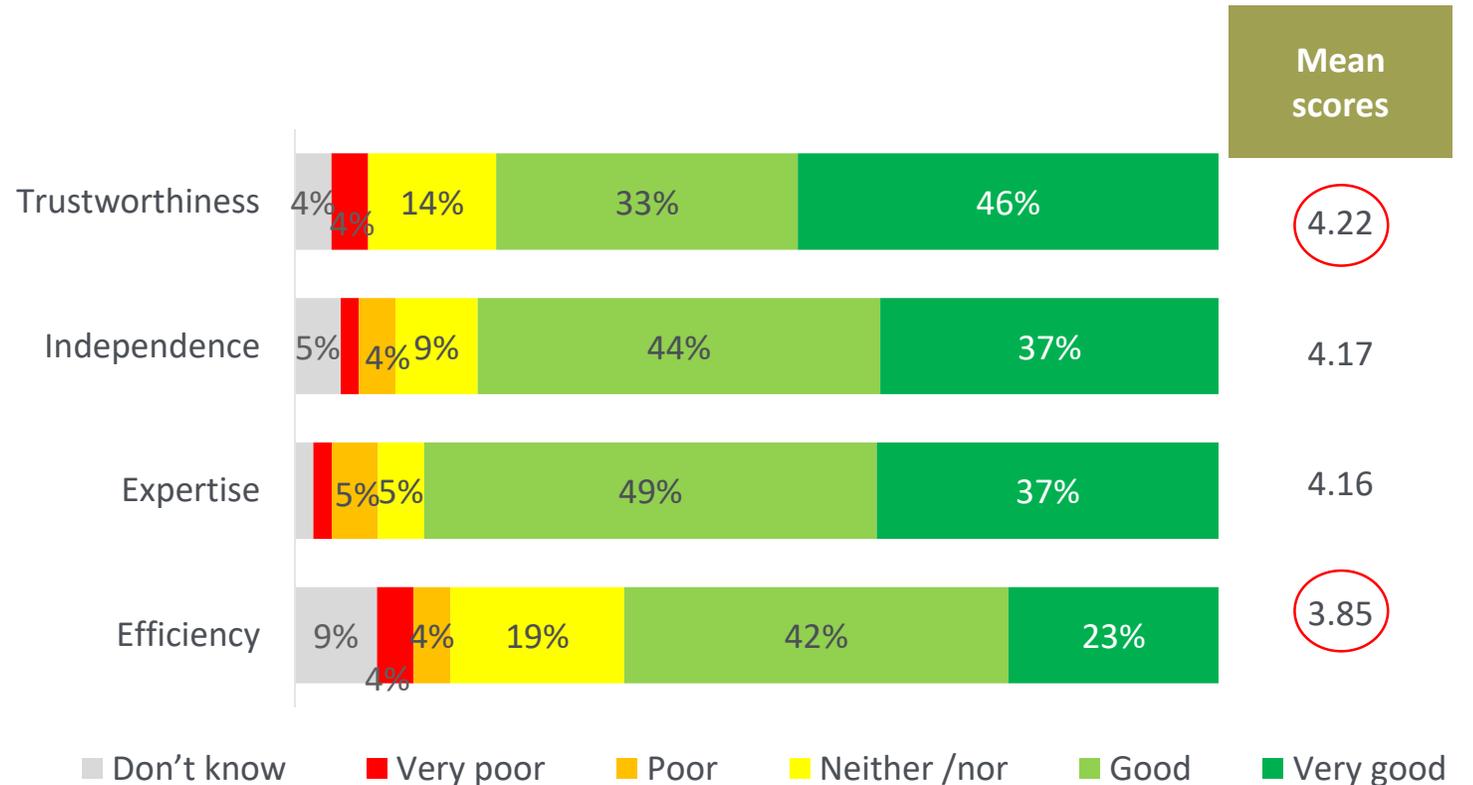
- The overall perception and experience was that SFC works in a highly efficient way - “like a well-oiled machine” according to one respondent.
- Perceptions around accuracy of data and the responsiveness of SFC (responding to emails and phone calls etc.) were universally good amongst respondents who have experience of these things.
- Specifically amongst those who work most closely with SFC (the Scottish Government respondents), perceptions were largely very positive. Some did highlight rare occasions where they feel SFC could have done better. One anecdote described how there was confusion over when SFC needed to know a policy decision, with the SFC requiring it sooner than SG understood.
- However, the SG respondents generally felt that the protocols and deadlines in place governing the working relationship with SFC worked well.

Core values

- Findings from the quantitative survey mirrored the qualitative findings and were equally positive.
- SFC gained high scores for all of the principles it works by. Trustworthiness set the highest benchmark with 33% saying it was good at this and a further 46% saying very good.
- Independence was rated as good by 81% of the sample with 37% saying very good.
- Expertise was given almost the same rating as Independence. The score was lower for this because 7% said poor or very poor. These respondents were all from government departments.
- Efficiency was given a significantly lower score than trustworthiness, however nearly a quarter rated SFC as very efficient.



Rate SFC



Principles guide the way the SFC works including: Independence, Expertise, Efficiency and Trustworthiness. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very good and 5 is very poor, how would you rate SFC's performance against each of these principles?

Comparable organisations



- The SFC was seen as comparable to the OBR as it produces independent forecasts for the Scottish Government, just as the OBR does for the UK Government. For many, OBR was the first organisation that came to mind as an independent forecaster.
- Some pointed out that there are other players in the forecasting space e.g. the UK Treasury, City of London, other financial institutions.
- However, some, particularly those with the closest working relationships with the SFC, were keen to highlight the limits to comparisons with the OBR. The SFC is not a ‘carbon copy’ of the UK forecaster; it has its own unique remit, protocols and legislative and statutory basis which is not exactly the same as the OBR’s.
- The OBR also has a broader range of taxes and policies to consider, as a UK body.
- Also, one respondent said that the SFC needed to be wary of straying outside its remit and offering commentary on things that are not its responsibility e.g. commenting on the likely impact on taxpayers of income tax policy.
- Other comparable organisations mentioned included the OECD, Bank of England forecasters, and Audit Scotland, but these were only mentioned by one or two respondents, and were not seen as the most comparable – that was the OBR. One mentioned FAI but qualified their comment to say they have a different remit.

Rating publications



Publications



- The qualitative sample was split in terms of those who had seen only the economic and fiscal forecast and those who had seen that and other documents.
- The majority were familiar with the report as a whole some were familiar with parts only and were happy with that.
- The comments made were all positive.
- SFC was described as having improved on previous forecasts by writing in a style that is more accessible and transparent.
- Staff were commended for being able to clearly explain the background to content and assumptions made in the economic and fiscal forecast as well as other shorter publications.
- There is an element of the unknown with the forecast as it is the first one.

Key qualities of publications

- Well –argued
- Transparent
- Detailed method and complex models
- Clarity
- Trustworthy
- Accessible

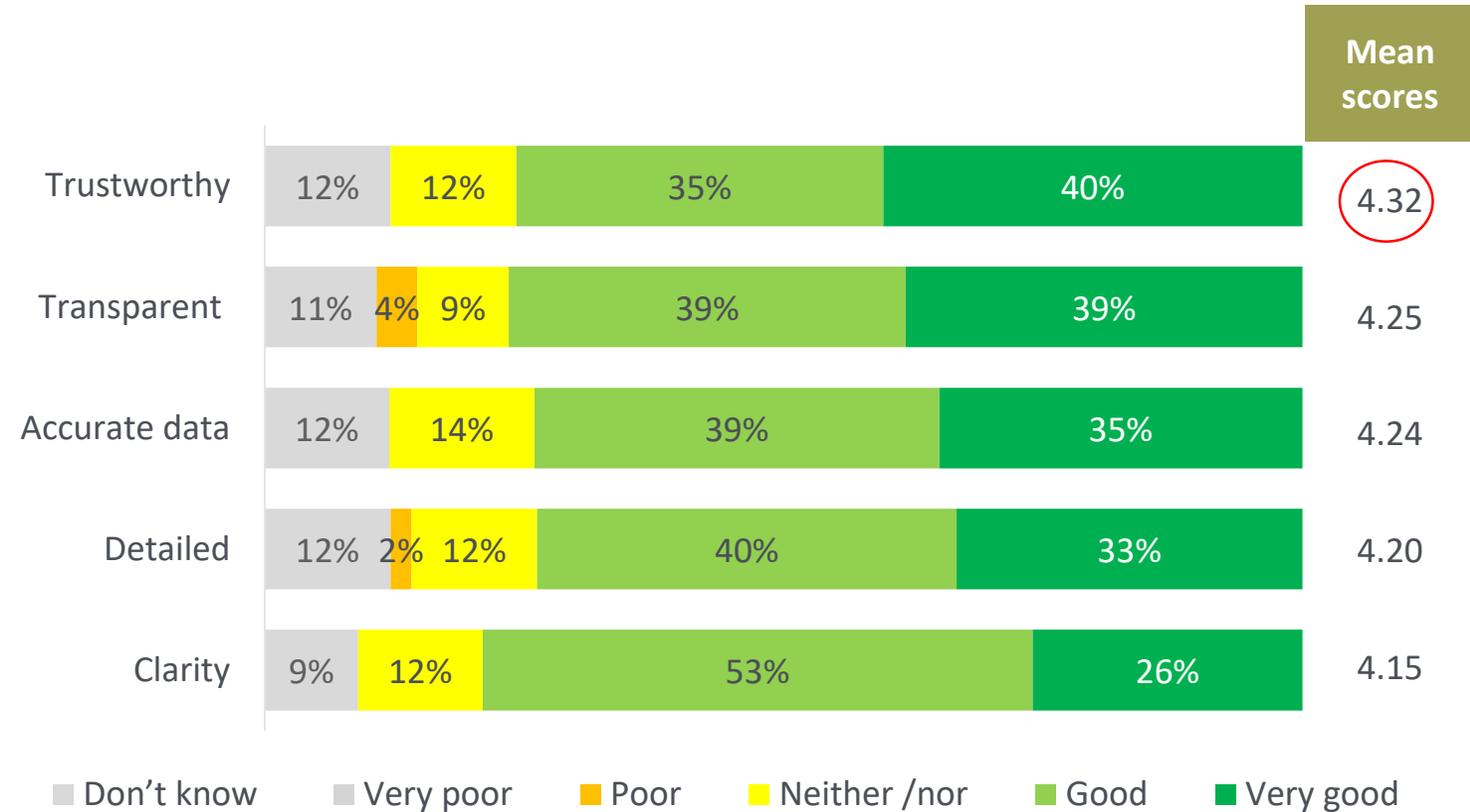
The economic and fiscal forecast is recognised for having the above qualities.

Publications

- Again, quantitative findings regarding publications were also positive.
- Publications were given high ratings across all criteria with 8 of the 9 criteria gaining a mean score of over 4 out of a maximum of 5.
- The score of 4.32 for trustworthy was significantly higher than the score given for quality of models (3.89).
- SFC's publications are recognised as being trustworthy, transparent, containing accurate data and being detailed. In every case a third or more of the sample rated them as being very good against all four criteria.
- In each case of the top 4 criteria approximately 1:10 didn't know enough about publications to give a rating.
- It is of some concern that 4% rated transparency as poor. This only equates to 2 people, one was from a government department, the other from a non-departmental government body.
- One person rated detailed in method as being poor. This person was from a government department.



Rate publications



How would you rate SFC's publications on each of these criteria:

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is very poorly and 5 is very well.

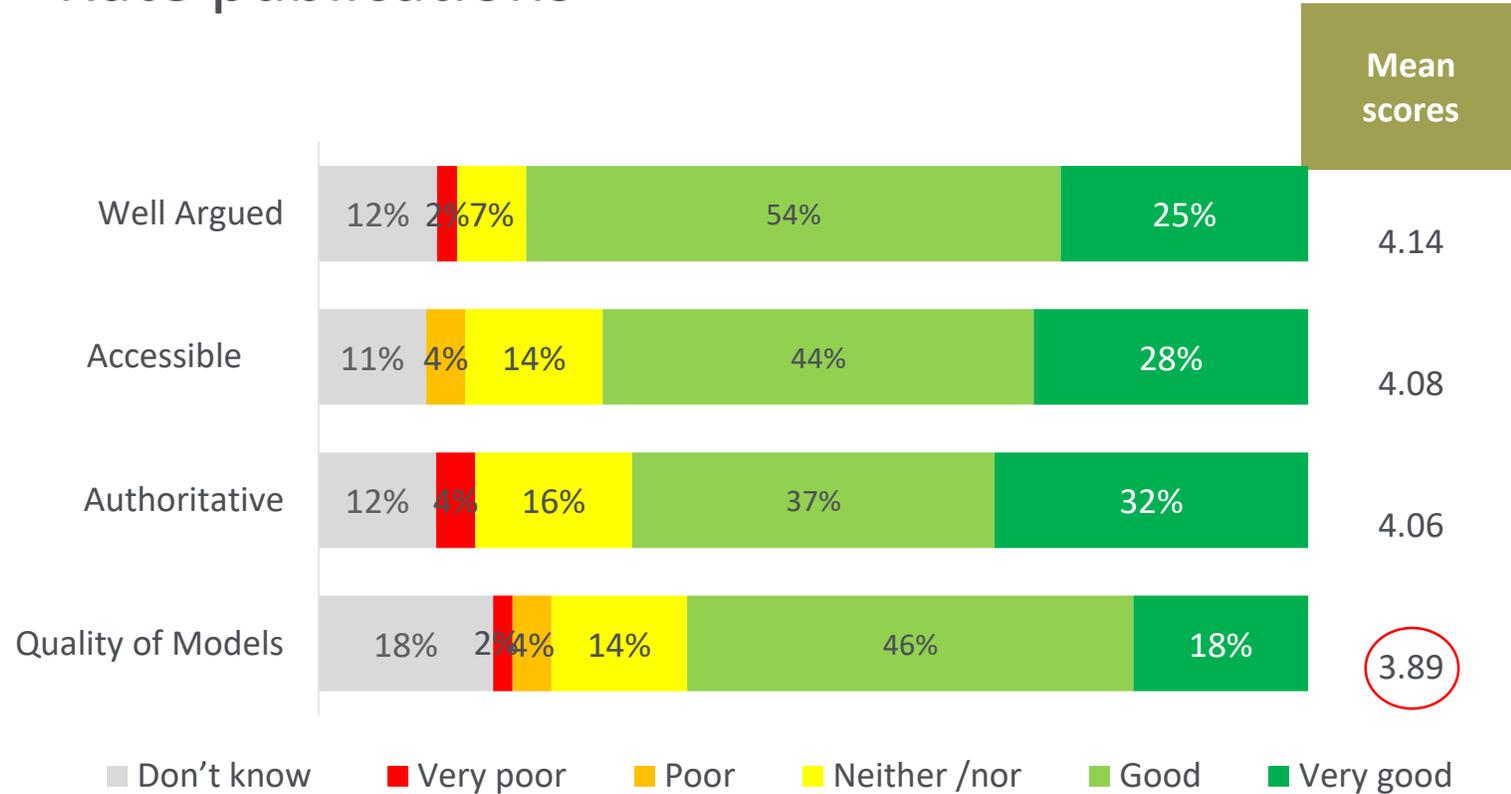


Publications

- Ratings for clarity and being well argued were also high. Although one person from an economic think tank/commentator rated well argued as very poor.
- Two people rated accessible as poor, one was from a government department the other from a non-departmental government body. A further 72% rated accessible as very good or good.
- Sixty nine percent rated authoritative as good or very good but 4% (two people) rated it as very poor. One was from a government department the other from an economic think tank/commentator.
- A large percentage (18%) could not rate the quality of models and 6% rated this criteria as poor or very poor. Two were from a government department the other from an economic think tank/commentator.



Rate publications



How would you rate SFC's publications on each of these criteria:

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is very poorly and 5 is very well.

Base (all) 57

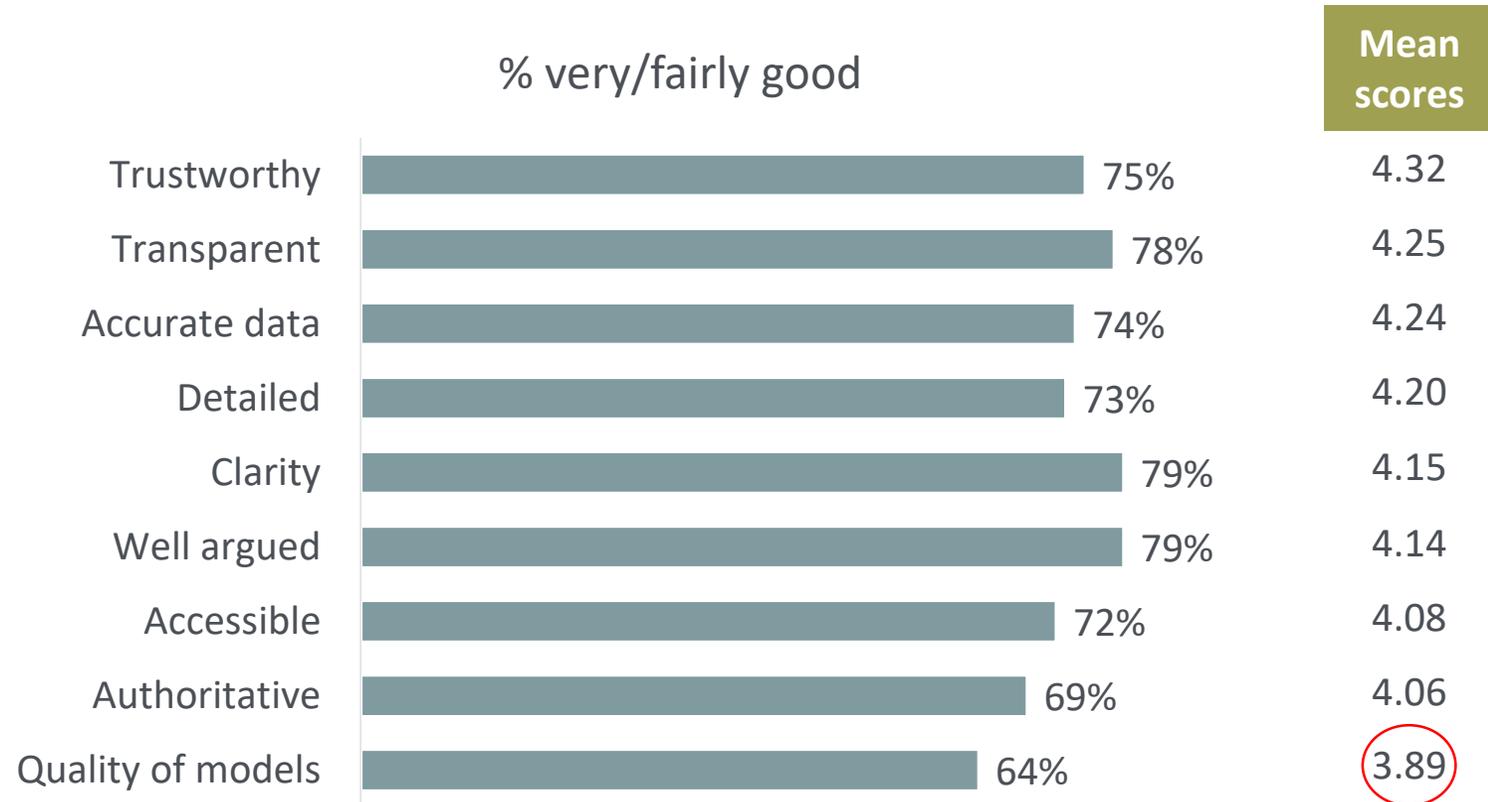


Publications

Stakeholder ratings

- Quantitative findings were also positive. Publications were given high ratings across all criteria with 8 of the 9 criteria gaining a mean score of over 4 out of 5.
- The score of 4.32 for trustworthy was significantly higher than the score given for quality of models (3.89).
- A quarter or more of the sample rated them as being very good against most criteria, except quality of models where 18% gave the top rating.
- In most criteria approximately 1:10 didn't know enough about publications to give a rating. The exception was quality of models where 18% did not know enough.
- It is of some concern that 4% rated transparency as poor, and 6% rated quality of models as poor.

Rate publications



Q: Full question text here

Base (all) 1,925

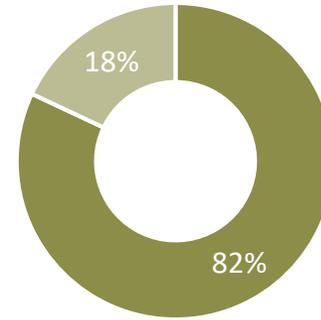
Brand assets



Website

- The majority of respondents (82%) had visited the website.
- While the ratings for the website were fairly good they were generally lower than ratings given for publications.
- The numbers of those giving ratings of very good are generally lower than for publications which has lowered the overall mean scores.
- One person from a government department rated navigation as poor.
- Two people from a government department rated ease of finding information as poor.

visited the website

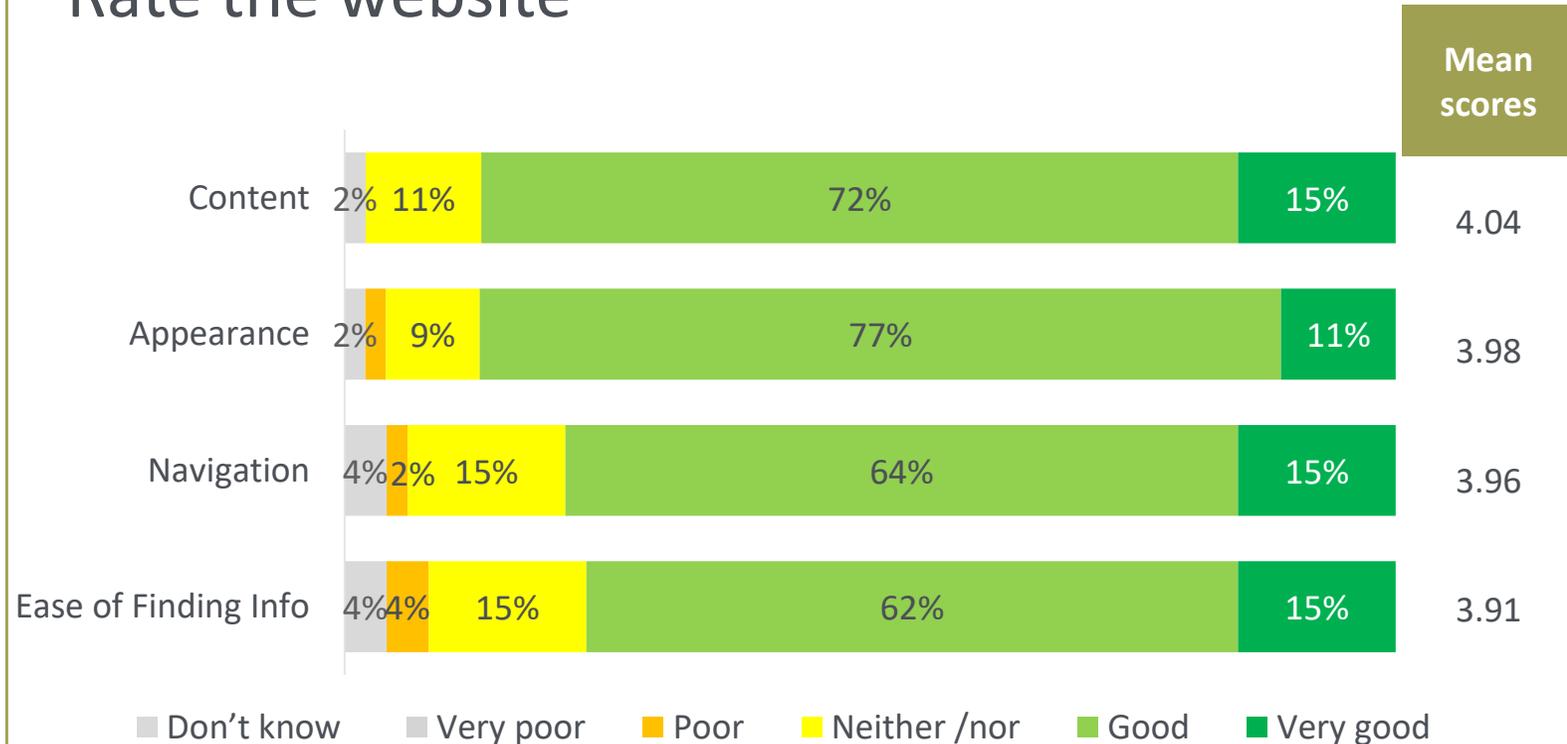


- Yes
- No

Base (all) 57



Rate the website



Have you visited SFC's website in the last 12 months? How would you rate SFC's website on the following criteria?

Mean score calculated whereby 1 is very poor and 5 is very good.

Base (all) 47



Improvements to SFC's website.



	No
Ensure it remains easy to navigate / Good sign-posting	3
Beware of overcomplicating / lengthy summaries	1
"What we do" section complete	1
Nothing	1

Base: 5 people

Better sign-posting.

Had some difficulty finding tables for the February updates when they were first published. The 'what we do' section does not mention SFC's role in assessing borrowing.

Précis, succinctness and executive summary: beware of falling into the trap of many corporate and government websites, mistaking length of item with clarity or utility.

If the SFC publishes more content in the future it will need to ensure it keeps being easy to navigate.

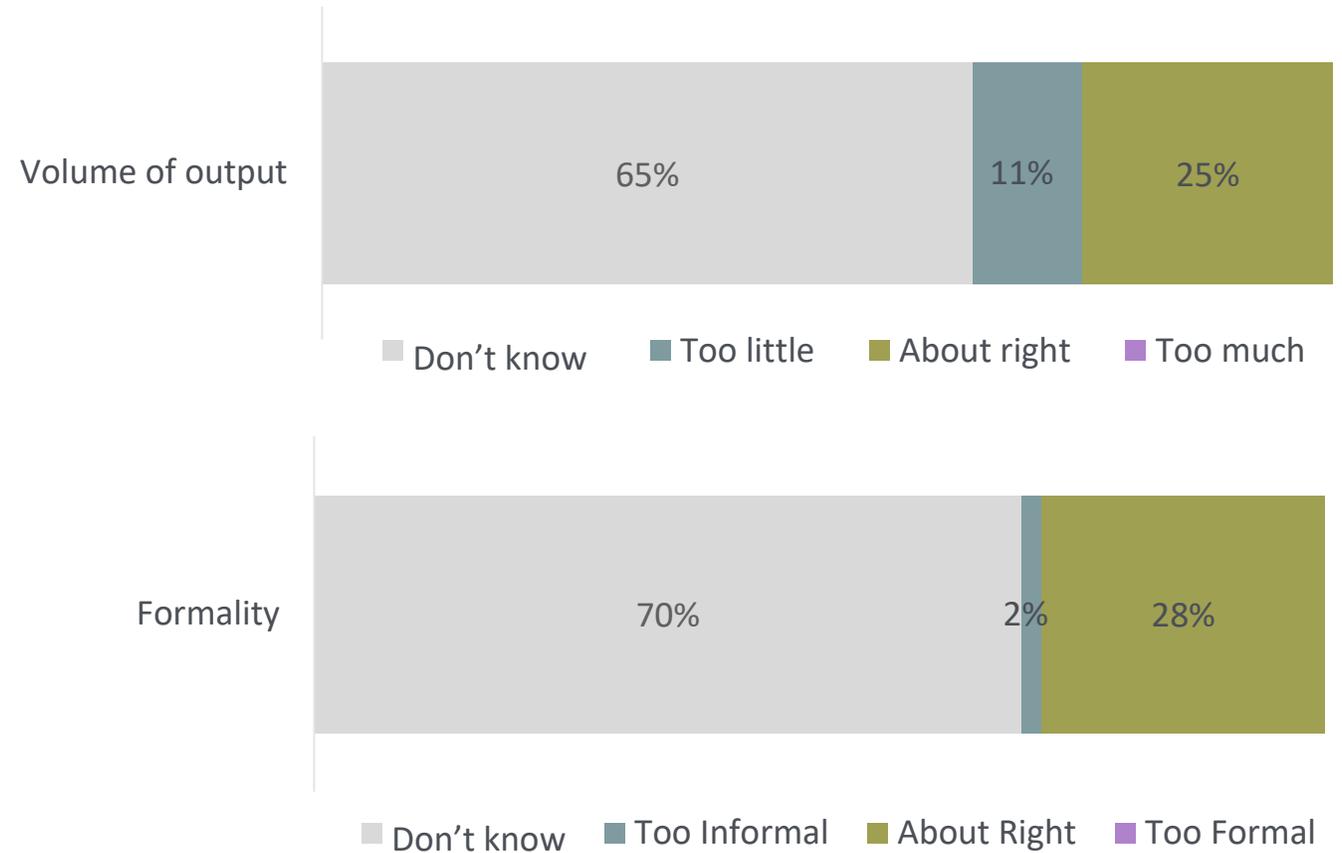
Just under two thirds of the respondents said that the most important improvement to made was to keep the website easy to navigate and to have good signposting. Other comments mentioned making sure that summaries were concise and not too lengthy and making sure that everything the SFC did was listed in the "What we do" section.

Social media

- The majority of respondents could not give a rating for social media.
- The majority of those who could considered both volume of output and level of formality to be about right.
- Those who said the volume of output was too little comprised 6 individuals from a cross-section of job roles.
- The one respondent who claimed the social media was too informal worked in a government department.



Rate social media



How would you rate SFC's presence on social media in terms of:

Base (all) 57



Improvements to SFC's social media activity



	No
Some people don't use social media	2
I don't follow them / weren't aware of their FB page	2
Social media not the correct platform for communications	1
None	2

Base: 7

I have not seen social media presence for SFC

Don't follow SFC on social media

Remember those who neither text or tweet.

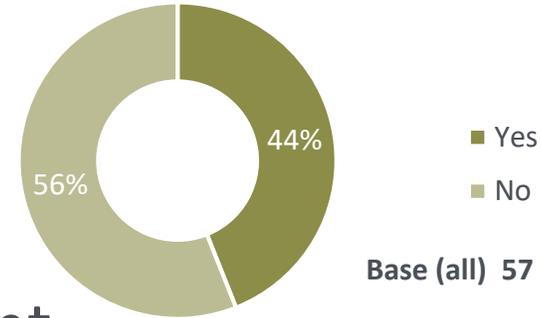
I'm not a user of social media so am not well placed to comment here. However, I wouldn't have thought it a particularly important aspect of its communications strategy.

Of the responses received for this question (7), 2 claimed that FCS needed to consider that there are people that don't use social media , 2 weren't aware that SFC have a FB page and 1 thought that communications were better placed on a different platform. Two respondents said that there were no improvements to be made or said that it wasn't applicable.

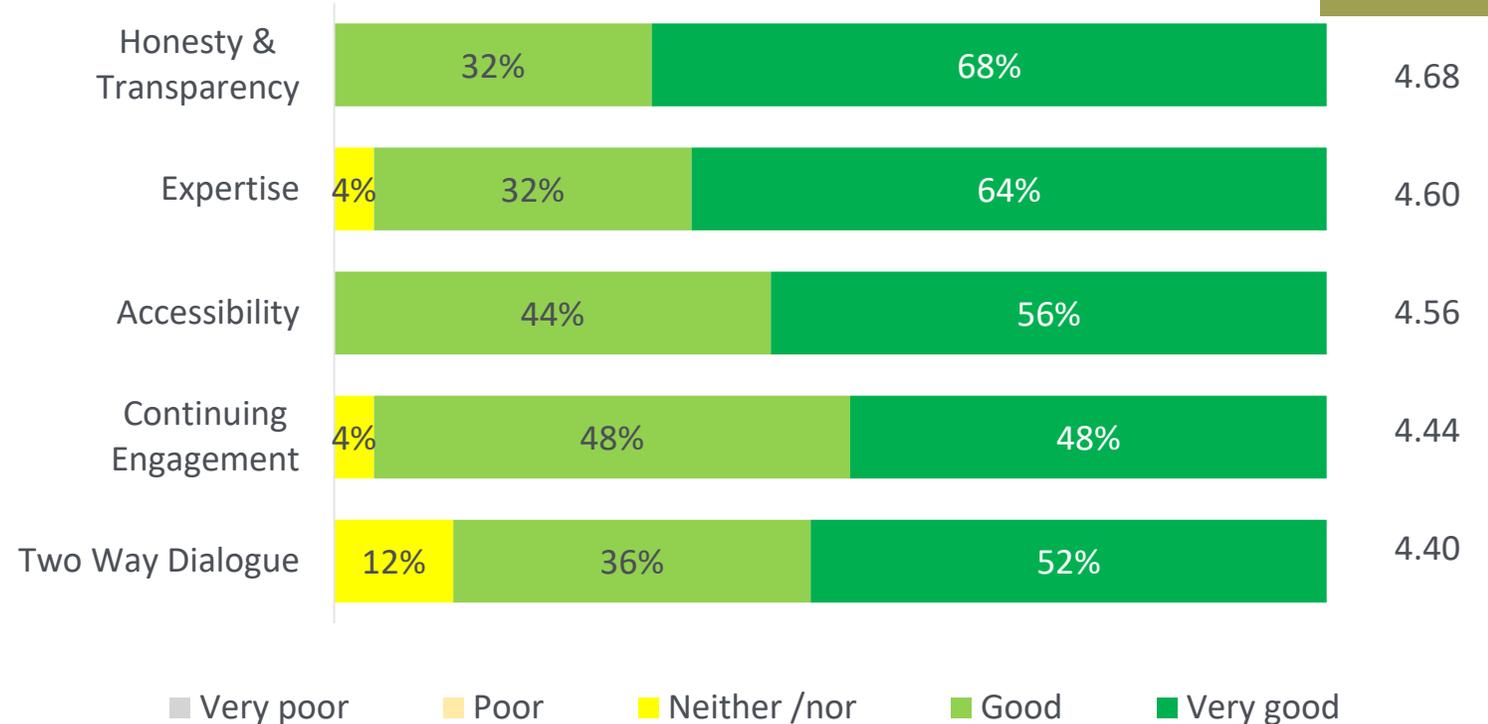
Events

- Just under half (44%) had attended an event.
- Events were given very high ratings across all criteria against which they were measured.
- All of those who had attended an event said it was good or very good in terms of being honest and transparent.
- The majority (96%) claimed the expertise to be good or very good.
- All who attended said the event was accessible.
- Events were highly rated as a way of continuing engagement.
- The majority (88%) said events were good or very good for two way dialogue.

Attended an event



Rate the event



Have you attended any SFC events in the last 12 months? How would you rate the event(s) you attended for:
 Mean score calculated whereby 1 is very poor and 5 is very good. Base (all) 25

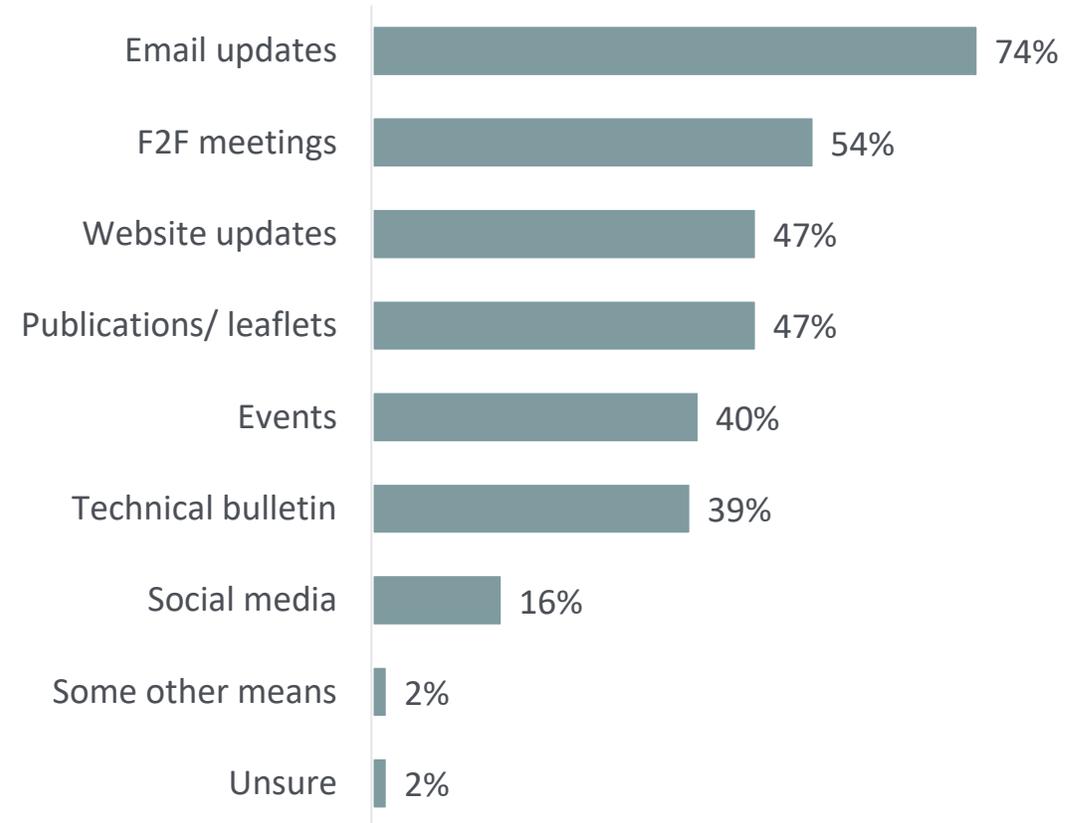


Communication

- Email is the preferred channel of communication, followed by face to face meetings, website updates, publications and events.
- Social media was the channel least likely to meet respondents' needs.



Preferred channel



What existing or potential SFC channel(s) of communication would best meet your needs?

Base (all) 57

Qualities of service you look for from SFC



	No
Accuracy , Detail & relevance	8
Impartial , open, transparent, trustworthy	6
Good forecasts	5
Easy to access	1
Regular Outputs	1
Personal relationships with key Staff	1
Prohibit bullying culture between organisations	1

Base: 17

I am looking for the SFC to produce good forecasts and keep a close eye on the Scottish Government.

Impartial, independent and accurate statistical information

I would like the staff of the SFC to behave more reasonably towards other organisations. I think there is a bullying culture in the SFC towards other organisations.

The relevance of their analysis to public policy debate is crucial. Understanding the complexities of revenue flows and the unintended consequences of change make their contribution very valuable. Clarity of writing follows clarity of thought. They can only explain clearly what is happening if they've applied the right level of thinking to the challenge. They need to be entirely open about the quality of the data they are working with, the assumptions they have adopted and the sensitivity analysis they have undertaken.

Of the responses received for this question (17) the qualities most often mentioned were accuracy, detail and relevance. Being impartial, open and transparent was important as was providing good forecasts. There were single mentions for the service to be easy to access, provide regular outputs , provide personal relationships with key staff and prohibit bullying between other organisations.

What if anything could SFC do better?



	No
Visibility - Getting public aware	4
Strengthen independence from Government	2
Allow technical engagement with the press	1
Improve its approach to publications	1
Improve forecasting experience and staff skills	1
Stay away from The Crowd and Groupthink	1
Assess what to do less of (some information provided by SFC not needed)	1
Misc	1
Improve relationships and attitude to other organisations	1
None	1

Base: 14

Visibility - so that public is aware and understands role of SFC

Strengthen independence from government.

Allow its technical people to engage more with press.

Improve their forecasting expertise and technical skills of staff.

Clearly its engagement with other organisations needs to improve. It just threatens to escalate issues when it doesn't get exactly what it wants. So the staff in the SFC needs to jointly sit down and agree what is sensible with other organisations and stick to it. They agree something and then a couple of months later change their minds.

Of the responses received for this question (14), the biggest response was from those who thought that making the public more aware was important (4) followed by strengthening independence from the Scottish Government (2). Other comments related to improving technical engagement, improving relationships, improvements to forecasting and publications.

Building Awareness



- The majority of respondents (all bar 2) felt they knew all they needed to about SFC.
- One said SFC could work on raising its profile with the wider general public.
- One claimed that SFC should get a full time communications manager.
- The best ways of raising awareness were thought to be: events, social media ,email and getting a press officer

Conclusions



Conclusions



Perceptions and performance

- Respondents to the survey set a high benchmark of confidence in having a named person at SFC they could contact. The overall confidence in knowing what SFC does was slightly lower than having a named person as a significantly lower number of respondents were very confident. Findings from both stages of research were consistent in that people had a positive working relationship with SFC. More could be done to make stakeholders aware of all that SFC does.
- The benchmark for usefulness was set at a level very close to knowing what SFC does. It is not unreasonable to hypothesise that once stakeholders understand better what SFC does they may see an increase in levels of perceived usefulness.
- The benchmark for being approachable was significantly higher than for being flexible. This could be to do with the tension that exists with Scottish Government who sometimes like to delay policy decisions.

Core values

- SFC gained high scores in the survey for all of the principles it works by, reinforcing positive perceptions found in the qualitative interviews. Trustworthiness was given the highest rating compared to other values and it was significantly higher than scores for efficiency. This could be to do with a notable cohort who were unsure and said neither good nor poor.

Publications

- Consistent with first stage qualitative findings, respondents rated SFC's publications very highly across the majority of criteria they were measured for. Publications were clearly seen as trustworthy, transparent, having accurate data, detailed, clear well argued, accessible and authoritative. Respondents were less clear about the quality of models used as this was given a significantly lower rating than trustworthy. This could be to do with not all respondents being familiar with the models used.

Conclusions



Brand Assets

- Ratings for the website were fairly good however, they were generally lower than ratings given for publications. The ratings for the different criteria measured were fairly consistent.
- Very few respondents to the survey could comment on social media content and the majority, when asked about volume of output and formality, answered don't know. Very few made comments on how it could be improved.
- Events were given very high ratings for honesty and transparency , expertise, accessibility, continuing engagements and two way dialogue.
- Very few comments were made in response to the question: what could SFC do better.

Overall observations

- The response rate, while fairly high, produced a very small sample because the database of stakeholders was small at the time of research. The findings from the small sample of stakeholders who know SFC fairly well are very positive and reflect the nature of the relationships that SFC has with this group of people.

Thank you



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