

QUALITY OF PROVIDING PUBLIC SERVICES BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE LIGHT OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH. A STUDY OF CLIENTS OF THE MUNICIPAL OFFICE IN ZABRZE

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Purpose: The primary objective of the survey was to verify the effectiveness of the procedures used to improve the management of public services by the Municipal Office.

Design/methodology/approach: The perception of customer service quality was studied among clients who personally visited the Municipal Office in Zabrze in 2023 to avail of the on-site public services.

Finding: Besides determining the level of approval for the quality of services provided by the Municipal Office in Zabrze, the study also aimed to identify the reasons that made the clients find the administrative process either satisfying or causing negative feelings. There was also a verification of the changes in the quality of the town hall's operation, especially customer service, among the surveyed individuals who had previous experience with administrative matters. Respondents from this group were asked to point out specific changes they noticed since their last visit.

Practical implications: The results of the research project described in the article will be implemented into the realm of planning new organizational solutions, improving existing rules, schedules, and procedures, and supervising the entire process of client service.

Originality/value: Conducting research on the quality of client service allows for a scientific reflection on the functioning of public administration and expands knowledge on this subject. It also enables the identification of further research areas and determining spheres for the implementation of innovative solutions that streamline the operations of local government units.

1. Introduction

One of the primary research objectives was to obtain data pertaining to the parameters influencing clients' assessment of service quality and to rank the significance of various aspects of administrative matters in the overall perception of the functioning of territorial

administration. Consequently, a detailed analysis was conducted on the influence of factors such as: the subjective assessment made by clients regarding the competency of officials, the ability of staff to provide accurate and comprehensive information about the public services rendered, staff engagement, cordiality, willingness to assist clients, empathy, and courtesy. The residents' perception of the time taken to resolve a specific matter was also examined. An essential criterion for evaluating service quality was the accessibility for respondents to avail public services offered via digital platforms. Another critical issue was determining whether a resident could effortlessly reach the appropriate employee responsible for a particular matter. In instances where difficulties were encountered, the survey questions aimed to identify barriers preventing smooth interaction between the client and the official. It was also deemed practically valuable to define the type of administrative matters being addressed and to pinpoint the specific organizational units visited. When combined with a level of approval regarding service quality, this would facilitate the introduction of solutions optimizing the operation of the office.

For efficient client service, the manner in which clients obtain information about the procedure for handling their matters is of paramount importance. Utilizing sources authorized by providers of verified and accurate information enhances the ergonomics of the process. Therefore, from both the perspective of public administration and the residents, better outcomes are achieved by familiarizing oneself with the prevailing procedures via a digital platform or the municipal website, and by preemptively downloading and completing the appropriate forms, rather than visiting the municipal office solely based on consultations with family or acquaintances.

Addressing administrative matters necessitates the drafting of applications as stipulated by regulations, issuing forms, preparing attachments, etc. For many residents, whose interactions with territorial administration are sporadic, such activities pose challenges. Hence, subsequent questions pertained to the level of accessibility, legibility, and consequently, the degree to which clients understood the documentation required for handling their matters. This topic is intrinsically linked to the service of clients with disabilities or citizens from other countries, which was also a subject of investigation.

2. Research methodology

In the research project, 922 individuals participated who personally visited the Municipal Office in Zabrze. They were approached by officials and asked to respond to questions regarding various aspects of client service contained in the questionnaire. Interviews were conducted from January 21 to August 14, 2023. Within the surveyed group, an additional 42 respondents indicated prior telephonic contact with representatives of the municipal office.

The course and outcome of such communicative relations, although mentioned by only 4.5% of the respondents, were also subjected to analysis. Thematic areas influencing the evaluation of service quality, which were not specified in the closed questions of the questionnaire, included an open-ended question addressing other factors shaping the level of approval towards the functioning of the municipal office.

3. Research project results

922 participants were requested to provide their opinions regarding the quality of client service at the Municipal Office in Zabrze. Among the respondents – unsurprisingly – the majority were residents of Zabrze, accounting for 92% of the individuals encompassed by the project. The remaining respondents were citizens of Ukraine or resided in other cities.

Considering the reason for visiting the municipal office, the majority of research project participants indicated the necessity to handle matters under the jurisdiction of the Department of Communication (34%), the Department of Civil Affairs (26.7%), the Tax Department (12.3%), the Zabrze Center for Entrepreneurship Development (4.7%), and the Property Management Department (4.5%).

Table 1.

Reasons for visiting the Zabrze Municipal Office most frequently indicated by the respondents, broken down by individual departments. Presented in percentages

No.	Department	Percentage of Respondents (in %)	Most Frequently Addressed Matters
1.	Dept. of Communication	34	Driving license Vehicle registration certificate Vehicle deregistration
2.	Dept. of Civil Affairs	26,7	Application for an identity card Resident registration Collection of an identity card
3.	Tax Department	12,3	Tax matters Submission of tax declaration Change in the tax declaration
4.	ZCED ¹	4,7	Establishment of a business Suspension of business activities Registration in CRIB ²
5.	Dept. of Property Management	4,5	Social housing Municipal housing Land lease

¹ The Zabrze Center for Entrepreneurship Development (Pol. ZCRP – Zabrzeńskie Centrum Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości).

² The Central Register and Information on Business (Pol. CEIDG – Centralna Ewidencja i Informacja o Działalności Gospodarczej).

Cont. table 1.

6.	Civil Registry Office ³	2,7	Issuance of a death certificate Copy of a marriage certificate Copy of a birth certificate
7.	Real Estate Dept.	2,6	Property tax Housing application Housing buyout
8.	Customer Service Dept.	2	Trusted profile (eGo) Archival documentation Registered mail
9.	Dept. of Construction	1,7	Building permit Decision on building conditions Certificate of housing independence
10.	Dept. of Ecology	1,5	Photovoltaics Furnace replacement Installation report

Prior to their visit to the municipal office, approximately half of the participants (48%) undertook a variety of preliminary activities aimed at gathering information concerning the procedures for addressing their specific matters. Most frequently, these involved consulting the official municipal website (24%), broad online sources (12%), engaging in telephonic conversations with municipal employees (4.5%), sourcing information from mass media outlets (4%), or inquiring among acquaintances, colleagues, or neighbors (3.5%).

The vast majority of the research project participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of public services provided by the Zabrze municipal office upon the conclusion of their errands. A notable 98% of respondents affirmed this sentiment. This result comprises a combination of affirmative responses of "yes" (93%) and "rather yes" (5%) to the question of whether the individual was pleased with the outcome of their municipal visit.

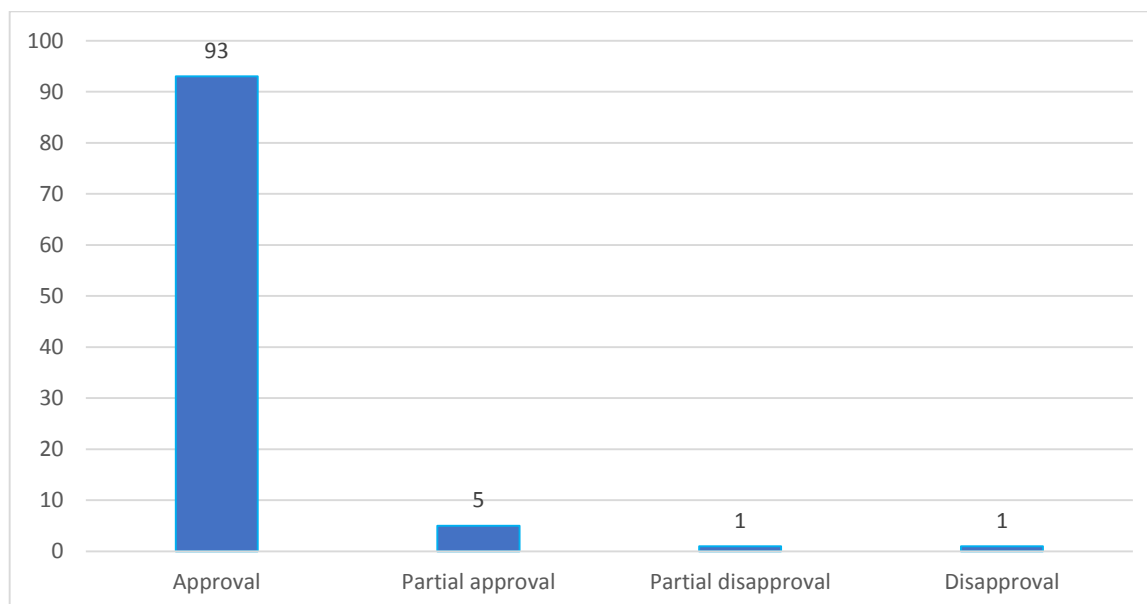


Figure 1. Overall approval level regarding the quality of public services provided by the Municipal Office in Zabrze. Percentage representation.

³ Pol. USC – Urząd Stanu Cywilnego.

3.1. Factors shaping the level of approval for the quality of service

In the course of evaluating access to essential information for a client aiming for comprehensive, efficient, and swift service in the office, the majority of participants expressed full approval of the prevailing status during the implementation of the research project. An overwhelming 99% conveyed a positive stance on the information they deemed accessible and exhaustive (comprising 95% distinctly positive indications and 4% partially positive). A small fraction of participants (1%) marked the response "rather no" when inquired if the information is accessible and comprehensive.

In identifying the elements perceived by the participants as having the most significant influence on shaping the level of approval concerning the quality of public services in the municipal administration office, results manifested as a set of attributes affecting the efficiency of handling official formalities and the ambiance within the office. The most paramount factors influencing a client's perception of the municipal office are the of the official (19%) who maintained professional relations with the respondent, coupled with the official's ability to convey comprehensive and comprehensible information (19%), and their empathy and courtesy (19%). Slightly fewer indications (18%) were attributed to the engagement of the municipal administration representative and their willingness to assist the client.

Subjective perceptions of an official's commitment or their substantive preparation and personal traits thus prevailed over an objective parameter, such as the timeframe of case resolution (17%). Distinctly, the least significant in terms of the image aspect was the opportunity to avail of e-services (8%).

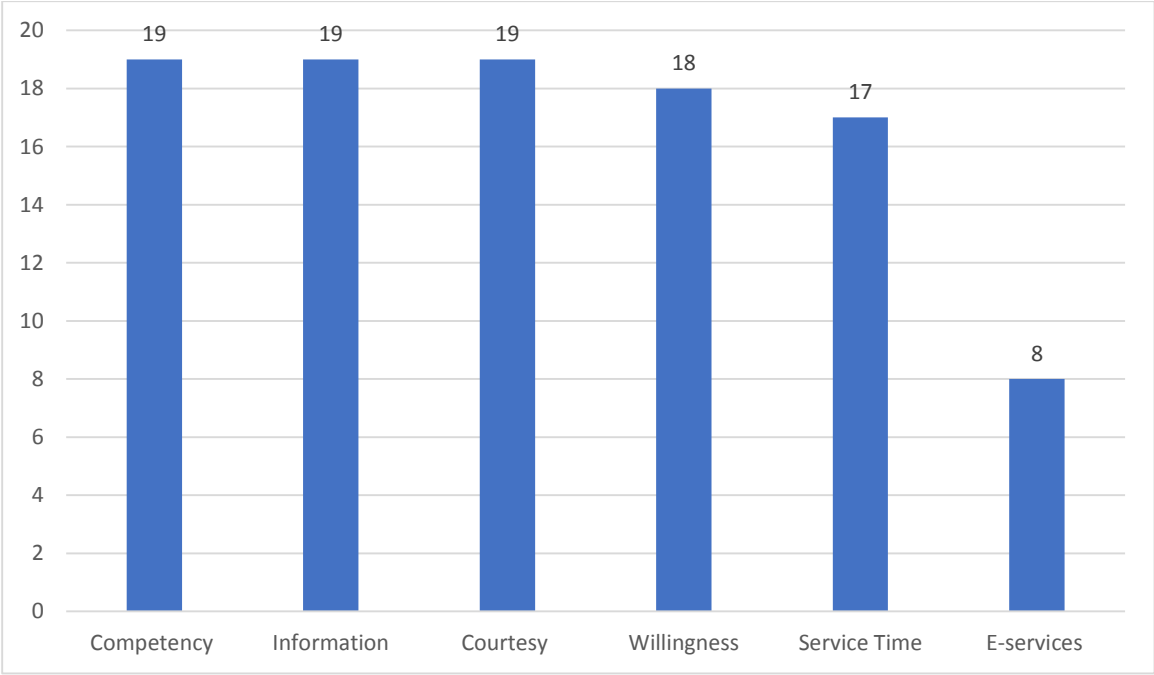


Figure 2. Factors shaping the assessment of service quality for clients. Percentage breakdown.

The vast majority of participants in the research project (99%) reported that they encountered no issues in reaching the appropriate staff member to address their matter of concern during their visit to the office. Evaluating the accessibility of applications and questionnaires used in handling administrative formalities, 91% of respondents expressed approval regarding their placement and ease of use. In this regard, 83% of respondents provided unequivocally positive feedback, while 8% were somewhat positive. A minority of 3% expressed disapproval (with a combined 2% being somewhat negative and 1% being explicitly negative). The remaining respondents did not have a formed opinion on this particular parameter.

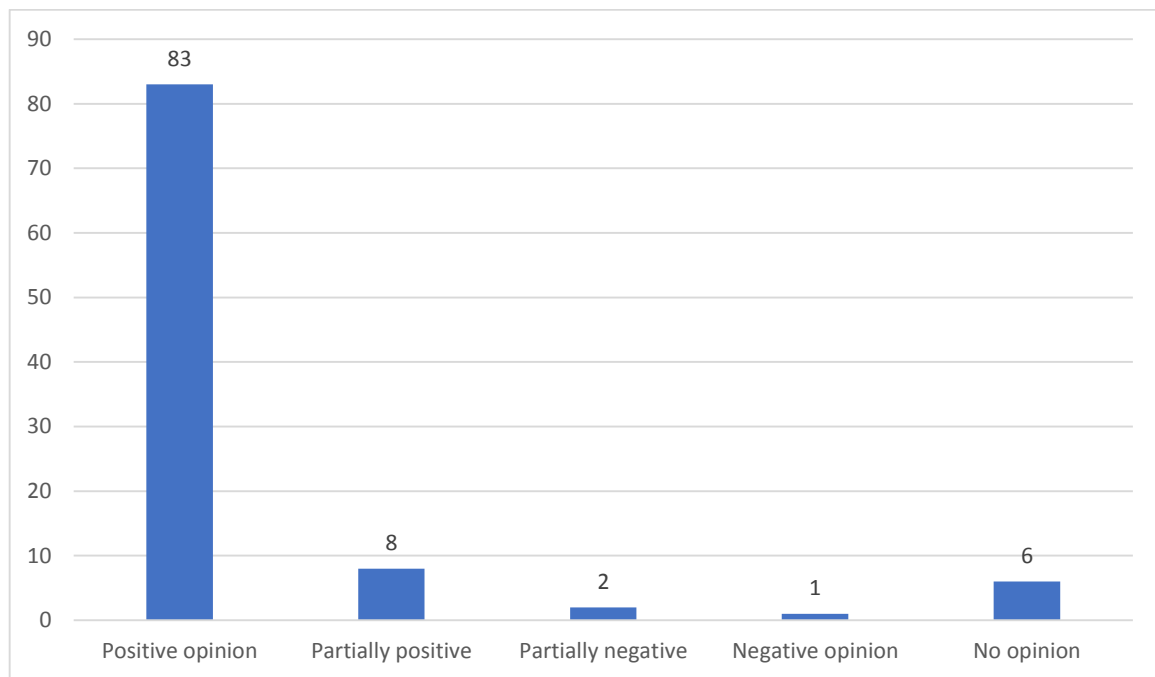


Figure 3. Evaluation of the Availability of Forms and Applications Necessary for Handling Administrative Matters. Percentage Breakdown.

3.2. Changes in the Perception of Service Quality for Clients

In evaluating the transformations in service quality observed since their last visit to the municipal office, one-third of the respondents noticed a positive change. 33% of the participants discerned improvements; however, the second-largest group, comprising 32%, opted for the response "hard to say." Following the undecided respondents, the third-largest group, making up 28%, believed that nothing had changed. This can be interpreted as either maintaining an appropriate or an inappropriate service level. Conversely, a mere 1% of the survey participants identified a deterioration in service since their previous visit. The remaining 6% indicated that they couldn't express an opinion as they were participating in the study during their inaugural visit to the municipal office.

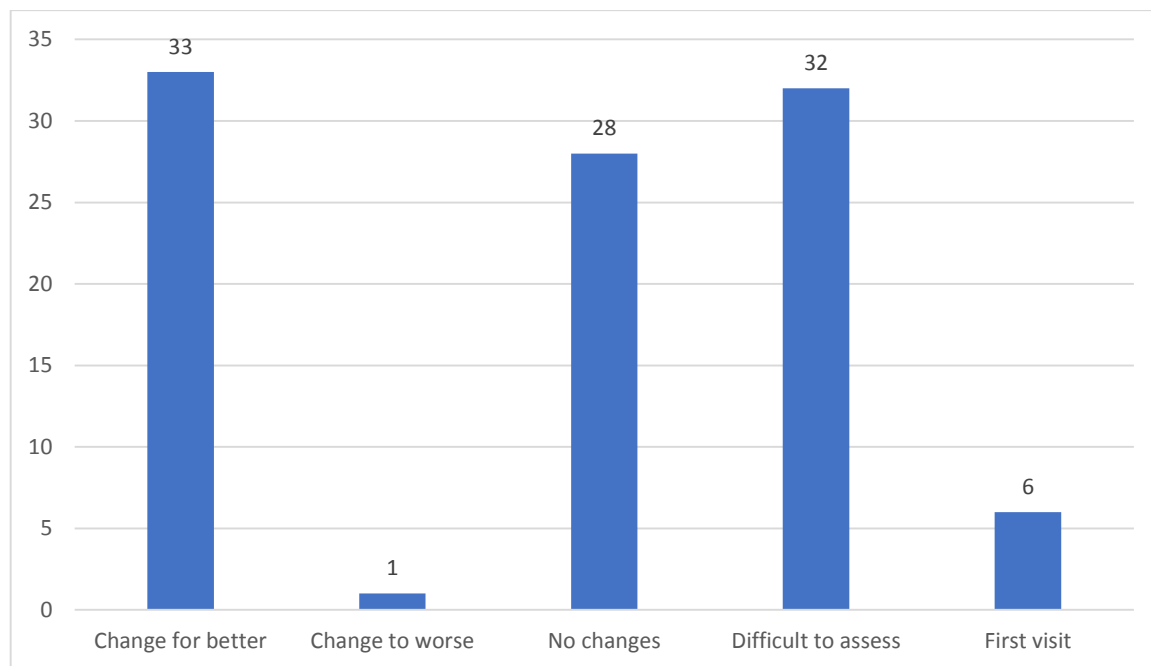


Figure 4. Identification of the trend in the functioning of the Municipal Office in Zabrze. Percentage breakdown.

In addition to the analysis of the responses provided by the surveyed participants based on the options presented by the project authors, the deeply ingrained perceptions of the respondents hold significant importance. An opportunity to reveal these sentiments was provided through comments regarding observed changes between subsequent visits to the municipal office. Naturally, the question pertained to both positive and negative shifts recognized by respondents, specifically those for whom this wasn't their first visit to the Municipal Office in Zabrze. In responding to the open-ended question dedicated to this topic, respondents frequently noted a reduction in waiting times to initiate specific procedures. Positive feedback highlighted the ease of access to the appropriate official. 73 individuals provided comments like: 'shortened wait times for processing', 'elimination or reduction of queues in the customer service area', 'no queues', 'essentially no waiting in line', 'reduced waiting times', 'fewer people in the waiting area', 'less crowded', and 'swift service', among others.

Another observed transformation pertained to expedited service once the customer had been attended to by an official. 66 respondents provided feedback such as: 'faster resolution of matters', 'quicker service', 'good performance by the service hall', 'surprised by the rapidity of service', 'matters resolved instantly', 'immediate service', and 'faster problem recognition', etc.

The study revealed that for respondents, interacting with a competent official was of paramount importance. 27 individuals gave responses like: 'good service level', 'high competence', 'competent service', 'faster service than during the pandemic', 'professional and friendly service', and 'officials are friendlier and better trained'.

In the memories of the residents, the politeness and amiability of the staff also prominently stood out. 19 respondents provided feedback such as: 'the officials in the office are smiling and willingly provide information', 'the staff are cheerful and pleased', 'kindness', 'courteous staff',

'assistance and commitment', 'friendlier service', 'a positive attitude of employees', 'more time dedicated to the customer', 'significant amiability of officials', 'kindness, willingness to help, openness of officials', 'helpful officials', 'a smile on their face', 'better customer approach, good manners', and so forth.

A significant factor influencing the image of the municipal office was the individualized approach to customers and the readiness of officials to support clients in performing necessary actions and providing comprehensive information about the various stages of the process. 31 respondents commented with phrases such as: 'unlike in other neighboring cities, the staff explain everything clearly and are helpful', 'assistance in filling out the application', 'help in completing forms, courteous service', 'after settling my matter, the official explained everything to me in detail', 'much depends on the employee - today the employee is polite, but previously not so', 'now officials willingly explain and assist, but it used to be unpleasant', and the like.

An appropriate organization of customer service also played a crucial role in the overall assessment of the municipal office's functioning. 19 respondents gave feedback like: 'better signage at the counters', 'there's a guard directing the queue', 'the cashier is onsite, no queues', 'more counters for car registration', 'more operational counters', 'more active workstations', 'good organization', 'more employees, stations, it works faster', among others".

Additional conveniences in the scope of service were also recalled, including the 'possibility of prior telephone discussion about handling a matter', 'opportunity to use e-services', and 'ability to handle matters online, which some utilize'.

Generally, for clients expressing approval of the recent changes, the following factors mattered in descending order of importance: 'lack of queues', 'efficient service', 'competence of officials', 'good work organization', 'kindness and helpfulness of staff', and a 'pleasant atmosphere'. Such a perception of the municipal office was encapsulated by one respondent with the term: 'a friendly office'.

Within the group of neutral phenomena, the lifting of pandemic restrictions was noted. 6 respondents offered feedback such as 'no need to wear a mask', 'lack of COVID-related restrictions', 'no need for prior appointment, as during the pandemic', and so forth.

A group of 7 respondents negatively identifying the changes in the municipal office's operation ambiguously pointed out 'it used to be better' or 'it is as bad as before'. Some elaborated further with remarks like 'there are many people' or 'too many papers'. One respondent complained about 'a lack of courtesy', while two others highlighted issues such as 'parking problem' and 'lack of parking spaces'.

4. Summary

The concept of a smart city is anchored in six pillars - from the social, managerial, economic, legal, through technological, to sustainable development (Sujata et al., 2016). Striving to enhance the functionality of local administration is in alignment with the realization of this idea, which focuses on utilizing resources more effectively, that is, in a creative and intelligent manner (Kuzior, Sobotka, 2019, p. 41). However, it is imperative to remember that the transformation of cities towards a Smart City paradigm must consider the competency development of the residents. This implies a focus on the needs and skills of people in using information and communication technologies, rather than solely on the information and communication technologies themselves (Dashkevych, Portnov, 2023).

The results obtained from the research project hold value not only from a cognitive perspective but also in terms of practical application. The assertion that learning is a vital factor in enhancing competitiveness, as well as fostering innovative development (Kuzior et al., 2023, p. 11), undeniably extends to the optimization of organizational management processes. Local government entities should unquestionably monitor the availability of innovative solutions, the implementation of which allows for even more effective satisfaction of the collective needs of the local community. In terms of delivering public services, this could encompass cutting-edge technological solutions based on artificial intelligence and cognitive technologies. These are revolutionizing business operations and can also be applied in designing and implementing sustainable social development (Kwiliński et al., 2019; Kuzior, 2010). Digitalization should also be viewed as an opportunity for automation and simplification of procedures, saving time and money, as well as a supportive tool in managerial decision-making (Kwaśny, 2022, p. 86). An illustration of the ongoing transformations can be seen in the number of public services provided using the ePUAP⁴ digital platform in 2020 compared to the pre-pandemic level in 2019. It was observed that there was an average increase of approximately 170%. Notably, larger urban concentrations recorded an even higher growth scale, reaching as much as 228% (Kuzior, Mańka-Szulik, Krawczyk, 2021, p. 261). The presented conclusions further pinpoint another research area where the impact of Smart City solutions on residents' actual participation in the functioning of intelligent cities should be analyzed (Lebrument et al., 2021).

In designing innovative initiatives, alongside the technological perspective, the participatory aspect is particularly vital. Efforts made for the benefit of residents should undergo social consultations at both the planning and organizational stages, as well as during implementation. The evaluative process also plays a significant role. This applies to many realms of local government activity, including the provision of public services and the

⁴ Electronic Platform of Public Administration Services (Pol. Elektroniczna Platforma Usług Administracji Publicznej).

associated quality of customer service. Conducting systematic research to draw conclusions and subsequently implementing improvements desired by the local community is an integral component of co-management by recipients in directing the transformations occurring in local administration.

In 2021, a similar survey on the perception of customer service quality was conducted in the same research field. When directly asked to assess this quality, the results obtained were comparable. At that time, 95% of the respondents rated the service as "very good" (compared to 93% in 2023), barely less than 2% chose a distinctly negative rating (1% in 2023), while the rest were "rather satisfied". It should be noted that the reliability of the data for this specific question is challenged by the methodology of the survey conducted by the office staff. They observed that individuals who seemed discontented typically did not want to engage in conversation or refused to dedicate time to respond. The absence of data regarding the specific number of refusals against the number of invitations to participate in the survey means that the level of dissatisfaction cannot be accurately diagnosed (Mańka-Szulik, Krawczyk, 2022). Comparing both studies, it is also essential to highlight that changes were observed in the declared purpose of the visit to the town hall. In 2023, visitors most frequently indicated the Department of Communication (34%), Department of Civic Affairs (about 27%), Tax Department (about 12%), Zabrze Entrepreneurship Development Center (about 5%), and Property Management Department (4.5%). Two years earlier, the order was as follows: Department of Civic Affairs (about 33%), Department of Communication (about 31%), Property Management Department (about 7%), Department of Construction (about 5%), and Department of Real Estate Trading (about 5%). During the 2021 survey, when describing the trends of service quality transformations since their last visit, most respondents did not perceive any difference in the town hall's operation. 34% of the participants noticed no change in work quality. However, during the described 2023 study, this number decreased to 28%. Conversely, in 2023, the most significant number of responses were from those convinced that improvements occurred, at 33%, and in 2021 it was 31%. Meanwhile, in 2021, 29% had no established view regarding the nature of the changes, and two years later, this undecided group reached 32%. In both studies, only 1% believed that the outcome of changes resulted in the deterioration of customer service quality. In 2023, the number of participants who stated that they had no point of reference for comparisons, as they were visiting the office for the first time, increased by 1 percentage point (from 5% in 2021 to 6% in 2023).

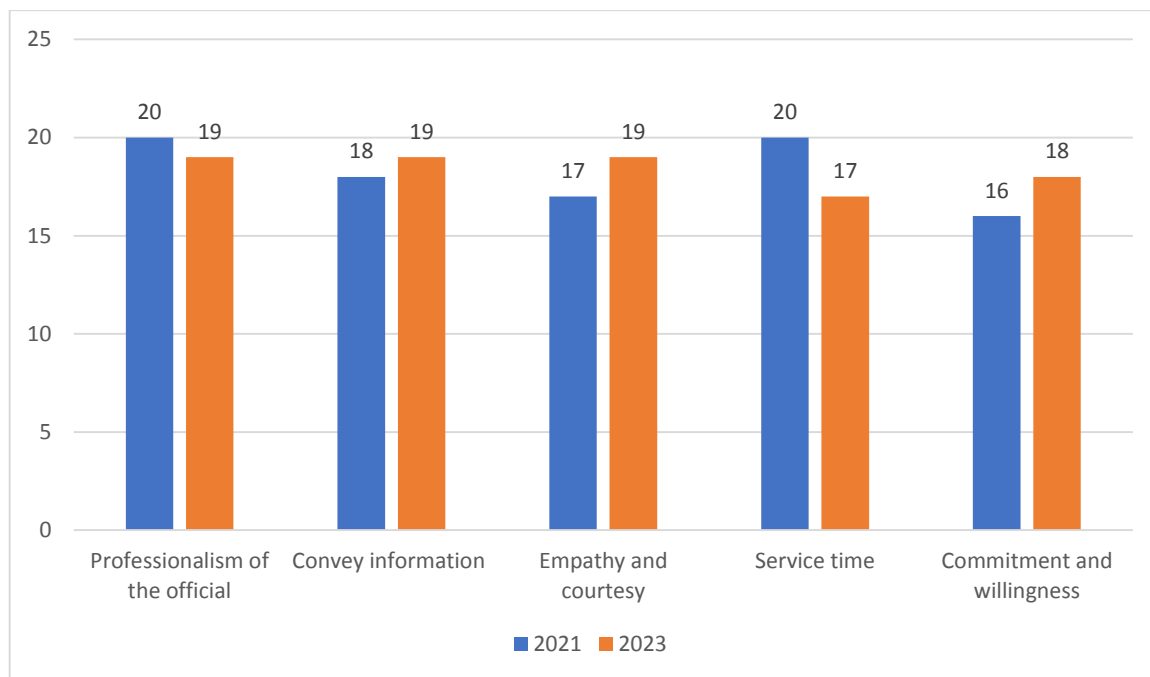


Figure 5. Transformations in the factors determining the assessment of customer service quality as declared by the respondents, based on studies in 2021 and 2023. Percentage representation.

Among the factors most significantly influencing the perception of service quality in 2021, the professionalism of the official was most frequently indicated, accounting for 20% of the responses. The competence of the employee retained its top position in 2023, albeit garnering 19% of the responses. The role of the employee's ability to convey information increased from 18% in 2021 to 19% in 2023. Empathy and courtesy of the employee also received slightly more mentions, rising from 17% in 2021 to 19% in 2023. Similarly, the commitment and willingness to help by the employee increased from 16% in 2021 to 18% in 2023. Interestingly, a slight decrease was observed in the number of respondents for whom the basis for assessing service quality is the time taken to handle administrative matters, dropping from 20% in 2021 to 17% in 2023.

Conducting systematic research on the quality of service for constituents using public services through local government facilitates scholarly reflection on the functioning of the administration and expands knowledge on this subject. In an applied dimension, it provides the opportunity to identify and rectify irregularities, while simultaneously facilitating the execution of routine tasks, oversight of the effectiveness of the process, and the introduction of improvements. Indeed, among the respondents, 33% noticed a positive change since their last visit to the Zabrze town hall.

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