

In-house Report 148

LOCAL AUTHORITY OMNIBUS SURVEY WAVE 9

Local Authority Omnibus Survey Wave 9

**A Report for the Department for Work and Pensions,
Prepared by NOP Social and Political and Office for Public
Management**

By

Claire Durrant, Elaine Winter, Sharon Gibbens And Simon Courage

© Crown copyright 2003. Published with permission of the Department for Work and Pensions on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office.

The text in this report (excluding the Royal Arms and Departmental logos) may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium provided that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the report specified. The DWP would appreciate receiving copies of any publication that includes material taken from this report.

Any queries relating to the content of this report and copies of publications that include material from this report should be sent to: Paul Noakes, Social Research Division, Room 4-26 Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT

For information about Crown copyright you should visit the Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) website at: www.hmso.gov.uk
First Published 2003

ISBN 1 84388 309 0

ISSN 1 368 244X

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
The Authors	2
Glossary of Terms	4
1 Executive Summary	8
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 Key Findings	8
1.2.1 Quarterly Monitoring Reports	8
1.2.2 Subsidy System.....	9
1.2.3 Help Team Toolkit	9
1.2.4 Changes to the Verification Framework and the Security against Fraud and Error schemes in April 2004	11
1.2.5 Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework	11
1.2.6 Fraud and error: Joint working	12
1.2.7 SOL Prosecutions	14
1.2.8 Programmes Protection Working Party	15
1.2.9 Security BVPI No. 76.....	16
1.2.10 Benefit Fraud Inspectorate	17
1.2.11 Appeals Service	19
2 Conclusions	20
2.1 Introduction	20
2.2 Quarterly monitoring reports	20
2.3 Subsidy system	21
2.4 Help team toolkit	21
2.5 Security against fraud and error.....	21
2.6 Registered social landlord verification framework.....	22
2.7 Fraud and error: joint working	22
2.8 SOL prosecutions.....	23
2.9 Programme Protection Working Party.....	23
2.10 Security BVPI No 76	24
2.11 Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.....	24
2.12 Appeals Service	25
3 Introduction	26
4 Quarterly Monitoring Reports	27
4.1 Introduction	27
4.2 Awareness and Use of Reports	27
4.3 Usefulness of Reports.....	29
4.4 Overall Attitudes to Reports	29
4.5 Impact of Reports.....	31
4.6 Using the QM Statistics on the Internet.....	33
4.7 Interest in receiving database with Report	34
5 Subsidy System	35
5.1 Introduction	35
5.2 Understanding of Changes to Subsidy System.....	35
5.3 The Changes in terms of Transparency	36
5.4 Comparing Subsidy Changes with Previous Arrangements	36
6 Help Team Toolkit	37
6.1 Introduction	37
6.2 Awareness and Use of Toolkit	37
6.3 Parts of the Toolkit Used.....	38
6.4 Effectiveness of the Toolkit	41
6.5 Attitudes to the Toolkit.....	42
6.6 Improving Performance.....	44
6.7 Interest in the Toolkit.....	45

7	Changes to the Verification Framework and the Security against Fraud and Error schemes in April 2004	46
7.1	Introduction	46
7.2	Awareness of the Changes	46
7.3	Clarity of Information Issued	46
7.4	Preparations for Change	49
7.5	Confidence about Implementing Changes	50
8	Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework	52
8.1	Introduction	52
8.2	Awareness of Verification Framework	52
8.3	Plans to Apply for scheme	53
9	Fraud and error: Joint working	56
9.1	Introduction	56
9.2	Frequency of Joint Working	56
9.3	Effectiveness of Joint Working with Jobcentre Plus	57
9.3.1	Effectiveness of Joint Working with Jobcentre Plus	57
9.3.2	Effectiveness of Joint Working with Other Local Authorities	59
9.3.3	Effectiveness of Joint Working with Inland Revenue	59
9.3.4	Effectiveness of Joint Working with Pensions Service	60
9.4	Providing Information on Time	61
9.5	Overall satisfaction with Service	63
9.5.1	Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Joint Working Organisation	64
9.6	Plans to Joint Work in the Future	65
9.7	Liaison Meetings and Forum to Raise Issues Locally	67
10	SOL Prosecutions	68
10.1	Introduction	68
10.2	Outcome of Cases Referred to SOL P	68
10.3	Overall Satisfaction with SOL P	69
10.4	Reasons for not Using SOL P	70
10.5	Effects of the Threat of Prosecution on the Amount of Fraud	71
11	Programmes Protection Working Party	72
11.1	Introduction	72
11.2	Awareness and Membership of PPWP	72
11.3	Attitudes to PPWP	74
11.4	Ways of Being Kept Informed	75
12	Security BVPI No. 76	76
12.1	Introduction	76
12.2	Changes Made to Working Practices	76
12.3	Effectiveness in Reducing Fraud	76
12.4	Alternatives to Security BVPI	78
13	Benefit Fraud Inspectorate	79
13.1	Introduction	79
13.2	Contact with BFI	79
13.3	Usefulness of Final Report/Outcome of Contact	81
13.4	Professionalism of Staff	82
13.5	Overall Satisfaction with Service	83
13.6	Importance of Various Aspects of BFI's Service	86
14	Appeals Service	87
14.1	Introduction	87
14.2	Customer Satisfaction Surveys Relating to Appeals	87
14.3	Number of Complaints Received in Last Year	87
14.4	Target Length of Time for Responding to Complaints	88
14.5	Information Provided to Customers about the Appeals Process	88

APPENDIX A - Methodology
Sample
Questionnaire Design
Fieldwork
Interpretation of the Data
Statistical Reliability
Response Rates
Sample Profile

APPENDIX B - The Questionnaire

APPENDIX C -The

Covering

Letter

Acknowledgements

This report is based on research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

NOP would like to thank Andy Brittan, Karen Elsmore, Sonia Corder and their colleagues at the DWP for the advice and support given during the research and in the drafting of this report.

We would also like to thank all the local authority officers who spared the time to take part in the survey.

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Department or any other Government Department.

The Authors

NOP

Claire Durrant is an Associate Director in the Social and Political Department. She joined NOP in 1996, having previously worked for MORI, where she worked for seven years in the Social Research Unit, and before that, the Gallup Organisation. At NOP she has worked on a wide variety of studies for central government, as well as local authorities and academics. This includes the British Household Panel Study and the Home On-Line Study, both run by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), based at the University of Essex, as well as two studies for the Department for Work and Pensions - the Maternity Rights and Benefits Survey among employers and parents.

Claire has been jointly responsible for managing the Local Authority Omnibus Survey with her colleagues Elaine Winter and Sharon Gibbens.

Elaine Winter, Associate Director, joined NOP as a graduate trainee in 1988. Since then, she has worked on a wide variety of studies but has specialised in managing longitudinal and employment/benefit policy surveys. Her experience includes involvement in a large-scale 4-year panel study for the HEA monitoring the effectiveness of their Active for Life physical activity campaign. She has also managed a seven-year cohort study of the effects of benefit policy change on lone parents and a panel survey with the unemployed and those on low incomes researching the introduction of the Earnings-Top-Up benefit. More recently Elaine has jointly managed two surveys for the Department for Work and Pensions on Maternity Rights and Benefits among employers and parents. In addition to these surveys Elaine works regularly for local government clients.

Sharon Gibbens is a Research Manager in the Social and Political division. She has managed a number of studies including most recently a London-wide study (with booster samples of vulnerable minority groups) examining issues related to domestic fire safety, as well as a survey for the Basic Skills Agency.

OPM

Simon Courage is a Senior Fellow in Organisational Development at OPM, specialising in the implementation and delivery of public policy. Before joining OPM, Simon worked for 12 years in

central government, including posts at the Department for Education and Employment, the Employment Service, the Cabinet Office, the Sure Start Unit and the Treasury.

Glossary of Terms

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI): The BFI, launched in 1997, aims to strengthen benefits administration by inspection and reporting.

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI): This is a Government project designed to improve local authority services. It puts legal duties on local authorities to review all of their services over a five-year period and acts as a system for measuring the performance of local authorities in service delivery. Security BVPI Number 76 is an HB/CTB performance indicator introduced in April 2003 that focuses on local authority activity on benefit security.

Council Tax Benefit (CTB): This is the means tested benefit available to help cover the Council Tax for those on low incomes. It is available to both people renting and owner-occupiers.

Housing benefit (HB): This is the means tested benefit paid to tenants or their landlords to help meet their rent.

Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS): The Housing Benefit Matching Service provides a DWP Data matching service for LAs. HBMS referrals identify potential incorrectness, fraud, customer error and official error in payments of HB and CTB. HBMS is part of the Matching Intelligence and Data Analysis Services within Jobcentre Plus. HBMS "rules" match HB/CTB data against other data sources to identify inconsistencies that may indicate incorrectness on an HB/CTB award.

Income Support/Job Seekers Allowance (IS/JSA): Income Support is a means-tested benefit paid to people on low income who are not in employment or unemployed (including lone parents and pensioners). Job Seeker's Allowance is the main benefit for unemployed people. It is partly contribution-based and partly-income based.

Jobcentre Plus: From April 2002, the Benefits Agency and Employment Service were replaced by two new businesses, the Jobcentre Plus and The Pensions Service. These businesses offer improved services, better tailored to meet the needs of different customers.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA): In October 2002, as part of the HB reform package, the Secretary of State made an announcement about the proposed introduction of the Local Housing

Allowance for private sector tenants. It will represent an average rent for an area and will be paid directly to the tenant rather than the landlord. At the time of the Survey, Local Housing Allowance was known as Standard Local Housing Allowance.

Local Reference Rent (LRR): used by Rent Officers for private sector HB claims, to compare the rent being charged with the average rent for similar properties in the area

Management Information Systems (MIS): Data is collected by DWP from LAs to provide information on caseloads, processing times, number of claims, staffing complements etc. The data is important to the Department to enable effective evaluation of policies and performance monitoring.

New claims: Claims for benefit from people who do not have a current live claim for that benefit, i.e. it is not a renewal claim.

New Tax Credits (NTC): New Tax Credits extended the scope of the earlier Working Families Tax Credit by introducing two new Credits: Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Working Tax Credit is payable to people in paid work below a certain income and Child Tax Credit is paid to families responsible for one or more children, again below a certain income level.

Pension Credit: From October 2003, Pension Credit will replace the Minimum Income Guarantee for people aged 60 and over. For these pensioners, Pension Credit will provide a contribution towards a guaranteed income. For the first time, it will also reward people aged 65 and over who have modest savings.

Performance Improvement Action Team (PIAT): Working in partnership with authorities, the PIAT offers free, expert advice and guidance on how to increase administrative efficiency and achieve sustainable improvements in benefit delivery performance.

Remote Access Terminal (RAT): DWP and its agencies allows local authorities viewing access to specified Departmental benefit data and/or access to electronic systems to receive benefit information. This access is given via a Remote Access Terminal (RAT) computer link to the Departmental mainframe systems operated by LA staff.

Renewal claims: Existing claims that are renewed at the end of the life of the claim (benefit period). LAs should invite claimants to renew claims prior to the claim expiring.

RSL: Registered Social Landlord, i.e. housing associations that are registered with the Housing Corporation.

SAFE: The Security Against Fraud and Error incentive scheme rewards LAs for identifying and acting on fraud and error in their HB caseload. This was introduced across Great Britain in April 2002. Further changes will be introduced in April 2004.

Section 19: Part of the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act, requiring local authorities to verify identity. Stipulates that claimants must produce either a NI number or other evidence enabling their NI number to be traced or for one to be allocated for the first time.

Single Room Rent (SRR): The SRR restricts the amount of rent which can be used to determine HB claims from single people under 25 who live in deregulated private sector tenancies and is based on the average cost of a room with shared facilities in the locality.

SOL P: SOL Prosecutions is DWP's own in-house Solicitors' Branch. LAs have been able to make use of solicitors from SOL P free of charge since January 2003.

Stats 116: This collects information on a one per cent sample of HB/CTB claimants, who are also in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance in May of each year.

Stats 121: This collects information on quarterly caseload stock counts, for HB/CTB claimants, who are also in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.

Stats 122: This collects information on quarterly caseload stock counts, for HB/CTB claimants, who are not in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance

Stats 123: This collects information on a 1% sample of HB/CTB claimants, who are not in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance in May of each year.

Stats 124: This collects information on a quarterly basis on areas such as administration, Fraud and Staffing.

Stats 124A: This collects information on an annual basis on areas such as Fraud, Overpayments and Best Value Performance Indicators.

Verification Framework (VF): Details minimum standards for collecting acceptable evidence to reduce fraud. Includes guidance on subsequent review and visits. Implementation is voluntary

Weekly Incorrect Benefit (WIB): WIB is Weekly Incorrect Benefit which is an essential component of the Security Against Fraud and Error scheme introduced in April 2001 and modified in April 2002 and April 2004. SAFE offers all LAs the opportunity to obtain financial rewards by proactively managing their caseload. Any overpayments detected as a result of LA action or change of circumstances reported to the LA within 28 days of the commencement of review activity or fraud investigation that leads to a reduction in benefit can earn a WIB reward.

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of Wave 9 of the Local Authority Omnibus Survey, conducted between October and December 2003 on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. All local authorities are asked to participate in the Survey and responses were received from 289 managers, representing a response rate of 71%.

Wave 9 of the Omnibus covers questions on the following issues: Quarterly Monitoring Reports, Subsidy System, Help Team Toolkit, Security Against Fraud and Error, Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework, Fraud and Error: Joint Working, SOL Prosecutions, Programmes Protection Working Party, Security BVPI No.76, Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and Appeals.

1.2 Key Findings

1.2.1 Quarterly Monitoring Reports

Almost every local authority (97%) was aware of the Quarterly Monitoring Reports. Although fifteen per cent of authorities that were aware of the Reports said that their Chief Executive does not pass the Reports on to anyone else, this leaves two out of three (66%) that said s/he does distribute them (19% did not know).

Interestingly however, only a quarter of Chief Executives (whose authorities were aware of the Reports) pass it to the Member with responsibility for Housing Benefit (26%) and/or Members of the Benefits portfolio (23%) and even fewer distribute it to the Leader of the Council or the Director of Finance (both 19%). Despite this apparently fairly low level of distribution, 85% of respondents taking part in the survey said that they have made use of the Reports, suggesting that they may be used more by middle, rather than senior, managers.

The Reports are being used by respondents mostly to complement their own management information (71% of those who have used them), as well as to compare the performance of their authority with similar (56%), and all (55%), authorities.

Respondents were overall very positive about the Reports in terms of how useful they are, with nearly nine in ten describing them as very (30%) or fairly (59%) useful. In addition, over half (56%) believe that the Reports have raised the profile of the benefit service within the local authority as a whole and agreed that they have increased interest in the benefits service by the Chief Executive and Council Members. However, around two-thirds of authorities (68%) were in agreement that the Reports have increased the pressure on benefits staff to raise performance and half (50%) disagreed that the Reports have made it possible for them to recruit more staff, while a third (34%) neither agreed nor disagreed. A majority of LAs (59%) also described the Reports as having had a positive impact on the benefits department as a whole. However, a third (32%) said that they have made no difference and eight per cent said that they have had a negative impact.

A majority of all authorities interviewed (80%) were aware that the statistics from the Reports are available on the Internet and two in three (67%) of these authorities have used them. Users were very positive about the statistics, with 87% saying that they are easy to use (25% “very” and 63% “fairly”).

1.2.2 Subsidy System

Authorities would appear to have a fairly good understanding of the changes to the subsidy system. A majority of LAs (83%) described the changes as clear, although most of these said they are fairly (57%), rather than very (26%), clear.

Most authorities (79%) agree that the changes have helped to improve the transparency of funding of subsidy arrangements. Just four per cent said that they have not improved transparency and 17% were unable to give an answer either way. In addition, 77% described the changes as an improvement on previous arrangements. Just one per cent of authorities said that the changes are not an improvement, while the remainder (21%) did not know. The main reasons why respondents think the changes are an improvement are that all the funding is from one source (80%), they only have to deal with one government department (52%) and it is more appropriate for DWP to maintain control of all subsidy (51%).

1.2.3 Help Team Toolkit

Nine out of ten local authorities (91%) were aware of the Help Team Toolkit CD Rom. However, among these authorities, only 40% had actually used it. Non users cited lack of time/too much

pressure as the main reason for not using it (50%), as well as the fact that the authorities' own policy/training unit tackled many of the areas (31%), lack of resources (22%), toolkit confirmed what they were already doing (20%) and the toolkit not being user friendly (13%).

Among the local authorities that have used the toolkit, 42% were trying to resolve problems, most commonly, a backlog of claims (27%). Performance Standards was the most commonly used section (75% of authorities that have used the Toolkit), followed by Performance Management (68%). The Processes, Project Management (36%) and People (33%) sections were all used to a fairly similar level, with the Technology section being the least used (16%).

Of the local authorities that have used the Toolkit, 38% did not want any additional tools added and over half were unsure (51%).

Ratings for the effectiveness of the various sections of the toolkits were very high: Performance Standards (88% effective), Project Management (87%), Performance Management (87%), Processes (82%), People (74%) and Technology (71%).

Overall 84% of authorities rated the toolkit as helpful (14% as very helpful and 70% as helpful). Ease of navigation was also rated highly among the authorities that had used the toolkit, with 12% describing it as very easy and 66% fairly easy to navigate. Similarly high results can be seen for straightforwardness of the toolkit guide and user instructions; 83% thought they were straightforward (11% very straightforward and 72% fairly straightforward).

The local authorities that had used each part of the toolkit were asked to rate whether or not it had improved their performance or made no difference. The Project Management Section was perceived as being the most effective at improving performance, with almost one in two (49%) authorities noting an improvement. In addition, 46% described the section on Processes as having improved performance, while almost two in five authorities that have used the Performance Management and Performance Standards sections of the toolkit reported an improvement (39% and 38% respectively). The sections perceived as least effective were the People and Technology sections: only six authorities thought that the People section had improved performance and only one authority thought that the Technology section had.

Ninety-one per cent of authorities that were not aware of the toolkit were interested in receiving a copy of it on CD Rom, while just 36% would like to have a demonstration or be visited by a Help Team member.

1.2.4 Changes to the Verification Framework and the Security against Fraud and Error schemes in April 2004

The majority of local authorities (96%) were aware of the impending changes and the information issued so far relating to the SAFE and VF schemes. A similarly high majority (93% of the total sample) said that they had seen the information issued about these changes.

Most of the local authorities in the sample (just over three in five – 63%) thought the information was clear - five per cent thought it very clear and 58% fairly clear. The third or so of local authorities (36%) who thought that the information about the changes was unclear were asked to specify what needs further clarification. Although around two thirds (65%) simply said that they 'need to have more clarification', 61% mentioned that high risk interventions and 53% said that the visit schedule for working age claimants need more clarification.

Almost all local authorities that were aware of the changes are either already making preparations that will come into effect in April 2004 (29%) or planning to make preparations (66%). For the main, these preparations are focused on training of staff on the changes required (63%) and organisational changes to cope with the new regime (59%).

A majority of local authorities (85%) were confident that their authority would be able to implement any changes to SAFE/VF in April 2004, although just 14% said that they were very, rather than fairly (71%), confident. The main reasons for any lack of confidence would appear to be uncertainty about the changes required (68%) and anxieties over whether their software supplier could deliver on time mentioned by half (52%).

1.2.5 Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework

The majority of local authorities, 94% were aware of the RSL (Registered Social Landlord) Verification Framework (VF) Scheme. Around a third (32%) of those aware said that their authority was planning to apply for the RSL VF scheme. Half would do so within the next six months (22% within next three months and 28% within three to six months); 16% said that they were planning to

apply for this grant in more than six months time and 24% stated that they had already applied for, or received, the grant.

The 143 authorities that said they are not planning to apply for the RSL VF scheme, were not doing so because of cost and resource implications (29%) and because they think that landlords collecting the rent should not be the ones verifying it (29%). In addition, a fifth said that they were not aware of any benefits of the scheme (20%) or were concerned about an increase in fraud (20%).

1.2.6 Fraud and error: Joint working

Authorities were far more likely to work with Jobcentre Plus offices and other local authorities than with the Inland Revenue or the Pensions Service. Two in five (41%) of authorities never work with the Inland Revenue and almost half (47%) said that they never work with the Pensions Service. In comparison, just four per cent of authorities said that they never work with Jobcentre Plus and 17% never work with other local authorities.

Around three in four authorities that work with Jobcentre plus said that the process is effective in terms of identifying fraud (82%), obtaining data in relation to fraud and error (79%) and improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error (71%).

Joint working between local authorities appears to be effective for all three processes. Ninety-four per cent of authorities that work jointly with other local authorities said joint working is an effective way of working for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error; 91% said it is effective in terms of identifying fraud and 84% said it was effective in terms of improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error.

Joint working with the Inland Revenue was regarded as effective by the majority of those local authorities that worked in this way, but the ratings were lower than those associated with working with Jobcentre plus or other local authorities. Three in five (61%) said that joint working with the Inland Revenue was effective in terms of identifying fraud; 53% stated this kind of joint working was effective for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error and 55% described it as effective in terms of improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error.

Effectiveness of working with the Pensions Service was not rated as highly as joint working with Jobcentre Plus, other local authorities or the Inland Revenue . LAs were more likely to find joint

working with the Pensions service effective for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error (53%) and identifying fraud (56%) than they were for improved efficiency (49%).

The two organisations that were rated the highest in terms of being co-operative in providing the information needed in time, were other local authorities (99% said they were co-operative) and Jobcentre Plus (82%). The Pensions service was rated less highly in terms of being co-operative, with three in five (60%) saying they are co-operative, while the Inland Revenue received the lowest ratings overall with just half (55%) describing it as co-operative in this way.

When local authorities with experience of joint working with other organisations were asked to state how satisfied or dissatisfied they were overall with the service they receive when dealing with them, other local authorities were rated highest (94% said they were either very or fairly satisfied). Three-quarters of authorities (73%) that have worked jointly with Jobcentre Plus said that they were satisfied, while overall satisfaction with the service received when dealing with the Pensions Service and Inland Revenue was lower (53% and 48% satisfied respectively).

When local authorities that are currently engaged in joint working activities were asked if they plan more, or less, joint working in the future, or to carry on at the same level, a majority said that they either plan to do more or keep the amount at the same level. In fact, around a half of those authorities that joint work with Jobcentre Plus (51%) and the Pensions Service (48%) said that they plan to do more joint working in the future.

Amongst the one hundred and nineteen authorities that do not currently work with the Inland Revenue, the most frequently given reasons for not working in this way were 'poor response from them/not interested' (19%), 'no legal gateway/against confidentiality rules/they won't give any information' (18%), 'take too long to respond to queries' (15%) and 'all manual/no computer links' (14%). On the other hand, the one hundred and thirty five authorities that said that they never joint work with the Pensions Service were most likely to give their reason for not joint working as being 'too soon/it's a new service/not set up yet', mentioned by one in five (19%) of this group. Perhaps not surprisingly, a quarter (25%) of those local authorities not currently joint working with the Pensions Service plan to do so in the future.

Approximately nine out of ten (87%) of the authorities interviewed said that there are liaison meetings or a forum which their local authority can attend which aims to raise issues between these organisations locally. Where these meetings or a forum exists, all local authorities except one said that someone from their local authority attended at these sessions.

1.2.7 SOL Prosecutions

A quarter (25%) of local authorities have referred cases to SOL P for prosecution. The seventy-two local authorities that have referred cases to SOL P, have referred an average of four cases during the period January-September 2003 (range: minimum = 1, maximum = 20). Just over half of these led to prosecution by SOL P.

There were thirty-two local authorities where one or more cases that had been referred to SOL P did not lead to prosecution. These authorities were asked if they had successfully prosecuted any of these cases themselves. Of the thirty-two authorities in this group, half (50%) said that they had not successfully prosecuted any of these cases. Three (nine per cent) said that they had prosecuted one and the same number said that they had prosecuted two cases.

The seventy two authorities that have referred cases to SOL P for prosecution were asked to say whether they thought those cases taken by SOL P solicitors led to more, less or about the same number of prosecutions as those taken by local authority solicitors. Three in ten of this group (28%) thought that more cases were not prosecuted by SOL P. Fifteen per cent however thought the opposite, that less cases were not prosecuted by SOL P whilst slightly fewer, thirteen per cent thought about the same number of cases were not prosecuted by both types of legal teams. A substantial number (44%) simply could not say.

Satisfaction with the service provided by SOL P was reasonable, with 47% of users saying they were satisfied (14% very satisfied, 33% fairly satisfied). The seventeen authorities that said that they were dissatisfied with the service provided by SOL P were asked to explain why they were dissatisfied. Reasons given included 'will not accept a lot of cases/turn them down for petty reasons (nine of the seventeen), and 'undue delays/slow to review files/reach decisions (eight of the seventeen).

The majority of local authorities do not use SOL P and they were asked to give reasons for not using this service. The reason given by the greatest number of authorities was that they are happy with the current service (58%). Control issues figured strongly also: wanting to retain control over prosecution policy was mentioned as a reason for not using SOL P by two in five (39%) and wanting to retain control over individual cases was mentioned at a similar level (40%).

All local authorities in the survey sample were asked if the threat of prosecution has led to a reduction in the amount of fraud encountered in HB/CTB claims. One in five (19%) thought it had led to a reduction in fraud but the majority, 63% in fact, thought the threat made no difference at all. When asked why they thought it made no difference the most frequently mentioned reason, cited by three in five, was that the courts were too lenient (58%).

The fifty-four authorities that said they thought that the threat of prosecution had led to a reduction in fraud, were asked to explain why they gave this answer. Four in five of this group (83%) said they thought that the publication of successful prosecutions may have had an impact. Seven in ten (70%) of this group said that increased awareness of the implications of prosecutions acts as a deterrent and a quarter (26%) said there is no evidence but the threat has stopped claimants from making fraudulent claims.

1.2.8 Programmes Protection Working Party

Four out of ten local authorities (40%) had heard of the Programme Protection Working Party. The most common way of hearing about PPWP is via HB Direct (38%); in addition, almost one in four (23%) authorities first heard about it via an HBR Seminar. Among the local authorities that have heard of the PPWP, only twelve per cent are members. This leaves almost three out of four authorities (73%) as non-members and fifteen per cent who do not know.

Among the local authorities that had heard of the PPWP, a majority perceived that the purpose is to help DWP develop its strategy (67%), help review current policies (58%), inform DWP of the impact of their strategy (52%), to give LAs a voice (45%) and talking shop (12%) were also perceptions.

One in two (50%) authorities agreed that PPWP plays an important role in helping formulate policy on fraud and error. Just over one in four authorities (27%) believed that the PPWP represent all types of local authority.

Just over one in two authorities (52%) would like to have its views represented at PPWP. Only 15% of authorities agreed with the statement that the PPWP does not represent the views of their local authority. However, only one in five (20%) authorities disagreed. This leaves 37% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 28% unable to answer the question.

Just over four out of ten authorities (42%) agreed with the statement that the PPWP ensures that DWP understands the problems faced by Local Authorities when implementing policy decisions.

In terms of the options available for being kept informed about the work of the PPWP, via HB Direct was the most popular (77%). This was followed by HB area of DWP Web site (56%) and minutes of meetings (49%). Only four local authorities would like to be kept informed via email/circular.

1.2.9 Security BVPI No. 76

Around a quarter (23%) of local authorities have made changes to their working practices since the introduction of BVPI/MIS changes in April 2003. The group of authorities that have made changes to their working practices were asked to specify them. Half (52%) said that they had retrained existing staff, three in ten (30%) said that they had increased the number of home visits undertaken and a quarter (24%) said that they had recruited additional fraud investigators.

When asked how effective they thought the Security BVPI/MIS changes have been in reducing the amount of fraud, 16% said they thought it was effective. Those authorities that felt that the Security BVPI is not effective in reducing fraud were asked to explain why the BVPI is not effective in this way. The response given most frequently, by approximately two thirds (64%) of this group, was that it monitors the ability to reduce but doesn't contribute directly. Two in five (38%) said that it was too early to say and one in five (18%) said that BVPIs are not the policy driver for their local authority.

When asked to say how effective they thought the revised BVPI had been in reducing error, a slightly greater number, one in five (18%) said that they thought that it had been effective. Three in five (59%) of the group of authorities that feel that the BVPI/MIS changes have not been effective in reducing the amount of error said that it is because the BVPI monitors the ability to reduce but doesn't contribute directly. Two in five (40%) simply said it is too early to say.

The local authorities that thought the revised Security BVPI was not effective in reducing fraud or error were asked to suggest alternatives that would reduce fraud and error. The response given most frequently, by two thirds (66%) of this group, was greater liaison between agencies. Half (51%) thought that a reasonable alternative would be to increase funding for staff recruitment and retention whilst two in five (40%) suggested improved electronic communications in an attempt to reduce fraud and error.

1.2.10 Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Around three-quarters (76%) of local authorities participating in the survey have had contact with the BFI. There are a large number of ways in which local authorities could have had contact with the BFI. The overall most common type of contact was through a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) – District (46%) or Single Tier (33%), although 46% also mentioned the BFI web site, 38% had seen a BFI speaker at a seminar or event, 36% have had telephone contact with BFI staff and 28% have had e-mail contact. Thirteen per cent had had contact with the BFI via Performance Improvement Action Team (PIAT), ten per cent had had a First Inspection and seven per cent had done so via a Follow-up Inspection.

Ratings of usefulness for different methods of contact with the BFI were generally very high with almost one in four authorities finding them useful. Overall, the Welsh improvement inspection was rated the most useful, with all participating Welsh authorities rating it as either very useful or fairly useful. At a national level, telephone calls to BFI staff were rated the most useful, with 43% of authorities rating it as very useful and a further 51% as fairly useful. Even 3 in 4 authorities rated the least useful method (Follow-Up Inspection) as useful (20% of authorities rating it as very useful and 53% as fairly useful).

General levels of staff professionalism were perceived as being very high for all types of contact. Special notice should be taken of the rating for staff at the BFI Exhibition stand at the IRRV Conference. All 39 authorities that had contact with these members of staff rated them as professional (59% very professional and 41% as fairly professional).

Overall satisfaction with various aspects of the BFI service was very high. Satisfaction was highest for e-mail, for which 87% of authorities showed some level of satisfaction (45% were very satisfied and 42% were fairly satisfied). The lowest level of satisfaction was for the Follow-up Inspection (66%). For this method of contact, only two authorities were very satisfied and eight were fairly satisfied out of the total of 15 who had experienced a Follow-up inspection.

All respondents who said that they were fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied and very dissatisfied with an aspect of the service from BFI were asked to explain why they were not very satisfied. The main reason for some degree of dissatisfaction with the CPA, both single tier and district, is that more time is needed to gather information (44% said this was the reason they had some degree of dissatisfaction with the CPA single tier and 43% gave this reason for having some dissatisfaction with the CPA district). Inspection/assessment could be scheduled to avoid LA peaks, more information available on good practices and more time to comment on draft report, were all common reasons of dissatisfaction.

A majority (85%) of authorities that had had contact with them were satisfied with BFI speakers. The main reason for dissatisfaction amongst the remaining fifteen per cent was more information needing to be available. Staff needing to be friendlier was the main cause for dissatisfaction with telephone calls to the BFI (12%). One in ten authorities (10%) thought the e-mail service should be faster and 41% who have had contact via the web site thought that more information should be available on good practices.

The most important aspect of the BFI's service is that recommendations in BFI reports are useful and workable for the local authority concerned. Over nine out of ten authorities (92%) rated this as important (86% very important and six per cent fairly important). Eighty-three per cent of authorities rated receiving their final draft of the BFI's CPA report at the same time as it is sent to the Audit Commission, as important.

From the results of this survey it would appear that the least important aspect of the BFI's service is local authorities working in partnership with the PIAT to achieve performance improvements or efficiencies. It should be pointed out however that PIATs are a relatively new service and as such we would not necessarily expect a great number of authorities to have experienced the service which may have influenced their perception of its importance. Despite the recent introduction of the service, two out of three authorities (67%) rated this aspect of the service from BFI as important (39% very important and 28% fairly important).

1.2.11 Appeals Service

Just six per cent of authorities have conducted a customer survey specifically asking about claimants experiences of the Appeals process. Among these sixteen authorities, thirteen had undertaken the survey in 2003 and eleven included a question asking about overall satisfaction with the way the appeal was handled. Among these eleven authorities, nine of them said that “satisfied” best describes their claimants views of the way the appeal was handled (two very satisfied and seven fairly satisfied).

Half of authorities have a formal complaints procedure for HB/CTB appeals (48%) and half do not (50%). However, among those authorities that do not have a formal complaints procedure, 26% record details of complaints received from claimants about HB/CTB appeals. On the other hand, 27% do not even do this and 46% said that they do not receive any complaints.

Authorities that either have a formal complaints procedure or record details of complaints received in some other format, were asked how many complaints they have received over the 12 month period ending September 2003 relating to HB/CTB appeals. Over two-thirds of these authorities (69%) were unable to give an actual figure, but among those that did, the average number of formal complaints over this period across all local authorities is ten.

Sixty-four per cent of local authorities have a target length of time it should take to respond to complaints about HB/CTB appeals. When authorities were asked what percentage of complaints were cleared within the target time over the 12 month period ending September 2003, nearly half (48%) were unable to give an answer. However, half did provide an answer as follows: two per cent said 1-50%, two per cent said 51-75%, six per cent said 76-99 per cent and 42% said 100%.

Almost all authorities (96%) provide information to customers about the appeals process for HB/CTB appeals. In most cases, this is in the form of a decision notice (84%) or leaflets (77%). However, 40% of authorities that provide information, do so on their website.

2 Conclusions

2.1 Introduction

The findings in this report are encouraging for DWP. Overall, the picture is of a department that is taking proactive steps on a number of different fronts to improve the administration of HB and CTB – notably in tackling fraud and abuse; and of LAs that welcome the steps being taken by the department and are positively engaging with those steps.

The main areas of weakness appear to be: a lack of effective joint working between LAs and other relevant agencies, especially in relation to fraud; and weaknesses in the handling of complaints about appeals by LAs.

2.2 Quarterly monitoring reports

Each quarter, DWP sends a report on the performance of each LA in the administration of HB/CTB to the chief executive. The statistics are also available on the Internet. There is almost universal awareness of these reports among LA respondents. Most LAs consider them to be useful. They use them for a variety of purposes, including complementing their in-house management information, comparing their performance with that of other LAs and raising the profile of the HB/CTB service within the LA.

A small number of respondents feel that the reports have a negative impact. This may be unavoidable given that the reports sharpen accountability and this may be uncomfortable for some respondents. In addition, some respondents may feel that a report on six indicators does not do full justice to the LA's administration of HB/CTB. DWP may wish to consider re-emphasising the positive intentions behind the reports and that they should be used as tools to improve performance.

Most chief executives do not pass on the reports to the responsible councillors. There could be a number of reasons for this: for example, councillors may be given reports on the council's performance – including its administration of HB/CTB – in other formats or chief executives may feel the reports would involve councillors in an inappropriately detailed level of management. DWP may wish to consult a small number of LAs and establish the true causes and then decide whether it is necessary to take any further action.

2.3 Subsidy system

DWP now pays 100% of the central government subsidy to LAs for the administration of HB/CTB. Previously, this was shared with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (in England), the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly. Most LAs regard the changes as clear and say they have improved the transparency of subsidy arrangements. Most also regard the new arrangements as an improvement and the main reason for this is that they have to deal with only one department on this issue.

On the basis of this report, the change appears to have been implemented successfully and there is no need for DWP to take any further action at this point.

2.4 Help team toolkit

DWP has produced a toolkit to help LAs improve the administration of HB/CTB. Nine out of ten LAs are aware of the toolkit but only two in five have used it. Among those that have used it, high levels find it useful and straightforward to use. Among those that have not used it, the main reasons given are a lack of time to do so and that it duplicates in-house resources.

DWP may wish to continue to encourage LAs to take up the toolkit in the course of normal discussions with LAs. It may help to collect some examples of how the toolkit has been of real benefit to LAs in improving performance in the administration of HB/CTB.

2.5 Security against fraud and error

Tackling fraud and abuse in the benefits system continues to be a high priority for the government. This is reflected in a number of measures being taken by DWP to reduce fraud and error in HB/CTB.

The Security Against Fraud and Error incentive scheme rewards LAs for identifying and acting on fraud and error in their HB caseload. This was introduced across Great Britain in April 2002. Further changes will be introduced in April 2004.

The survey focused on LA's awareness of and readiness for the impending changes. There is very high awareness of the impending changes. In addition, more than four out of five LAs are confident in their ability to implement the changes successfully. However, around a third believe the information about the changes is unclear and the main reason for lack of confidence in the ability to implement the changes is uncertainty about what changes are required. DWP may, therefore, wish to clarify those issues about which some LAs appear to be uncertain.

2.6 Registered social landlord verification framework

Following a successful pilot, there is now a voluntary scheme under which LAs can use RSLs to collect evidence required for the Verification Framework on their behalf. This is intended to streamline administration and reduce fraud and error. There is a grant available to LAs for using the scheme.

Around a third of LAs are using or planning to use this scheme. Of the remaining two thirds, the main reasons for not planning to use the scheme are adverse cost implications and concerns that landlords who benefit from HB/CTB should not also be the ones who verify evidence for it.

If DWP wishes to increase take-up of the voluntary scheme, it may wish to increase the grant available to LAs or promote the benefits of the scheme to LAs.

2.7 Fraud and error: joint working

LAs are asked to work jointly with other relevant public service organisations to combat fraud and error. In the survey, LAs were asked about their experience of joint working in terms of fraud and error issues. The four organisations that local authorities were asked to comment on in terms of joint working were Jobcentre Plus, other LAs, the Inland Revenue and the Pensions Service.

Many more LAs work with Jobcentre Plus than with the other three organisations. The effectiveness of joint working is rated as highest with Jobcentre Plus and lower, in descending order, with other LAs, the Pensions Service and the Inland Revenue. Fewer than two in five LAs work with the Inland Revenue. Where it takes place, joint working appears to be useful. Where it

does not, there appears to be a link with the other organisation's lack of preparedness to co-operate by, in particular, release information.

In nearly nine out of ten areas, there are local inter-agency forums at which issues of this sort are discussed. But the survey indicates these are not always able to resolve the issues. DWP may, therefore, wish to strengthen arrangements by, for example: reinforcing links with the other organisations at national level; asking one of its own agencies (Jobcentre Plus or the Pensions Service) to take a lead on strengthening links at the local level; or asking local strategic partnerships to take a lead.

2.8 SOL prosecutions

As part of the government's drive against fraud and abuse in the benefits system, since January 2003, LAs have been able to make use of solicitors from DWP's own Solicitors' Branch (SOL Prosecutions, or SOL P) free of charge.

Given the the service is free of charge, it is perhaps surprising that only a quarter of LAs have taken it up. This is particularly so because there is no real sense among LAs that SOL P is less effective than their own solicitors. Rather, there appears to be a wish among LAs to retain control over cases, and this is dissuading them from using SOL P.

DWP may wish to establish whether SOL P is in fact more effective than LAs' own means of prosecution – the evidence is not clear from the survey – and, if it is, promote wider take-up by LAs.

2.9 Programme Protection Working Party

The government has established a programme Protection Working Party for HB. This brings together people from DWP and LAs to identify and propose new and effective ways of protecting the integrity of the programme.

Half of LAs believe the PPWP plays an important role in helping to formulate policy on fraud and error. And over two in five believe it helps DWP to understand the problems faced by LAs in implementing and delivering policy.

Involving front-line delivery agents in the development of policy is recognised as good practice by government. Levels of satisfaction with the PPWP as a mechanism for this seem to be quite high. However, the actual number of LAs involved is low. DWP may therefore wish to make sure a wider group of LAs is involved, or that there is reasonable turnover among those that are involved.

2.10 Security BVPI No 76

Best Value is a key element of the Government's programme to modernise local government and places Best Value authorities under a duty to seek continuous improvement in their performance. There are a number of Best Value Performance Indicators across the key services, including benefits' delivery, and one of these is the Security PI. This PI, BVPI 76, is intended to measure a local authority's performance in reducing fraud and claimant error in HB/CTB.

BVPI 76 has provoked a lot of activity in LAs: around a quarter have made changes, including retraining of existing staff and recruitment of new staff. While only around one in eight local authorities believe BVPI 76 is, in itself, effective in reducing fraud and claimant error, the most common reason given by those authorities that thought it was not effective was that it better measured the ability to reduce fraud – which is the main purpose of this PI. The most favoured alternative for actually helping to reduce fraud is greater liaison between agencies. This is an interesting finding, given the weaknesses in joint working identified elsewhere in this report. Although there is, of course, no reason why there should not be both BVPI 76 and closer working between agencies.

2.11 Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

There are widespread contacts between LAs and the BFI, ranging from inspections for Comprehensive Performance Assessments to seeing BFI speakers at conferences. These are widely thought to be useful and BFI staff receive high ratings for the professionalism. There are a

number of areas where it seems the BFI could improve the way it works with LAs: for example, LAs would like more time to collect information for inspections and more time to comment on draft reports. But, overall, the results show that customers are satisfied with the service.

2.12 Appeals Service

Information held by LAs about this important issue appears to be weak. Only 6% of LAs have conducted a survey about customer satisfaction with appeals. Only half have a formal complaints procedure for appeals and, among those that do not, a quarter do not even record complaints received. Among those that do have a procedure or keep a record, over two thirds can nevertheless not say how many complaints they receive. Among those that can, the average is 10 in a 12 month period. Half LAs are unable to say how many complaints are dealt with in target time.

This suggests many customers may not be receiving a very good service in this area. This must be a concern because these are customers who believe they are not receiving their legal entitlement.

3 Introduction

Since 1999 the Department for Work and Pensions has run a Local Authority Omnibus Survey among managers with responsibility for the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. The main reason for running such an Omnibus is to provide the Department with a regular and flexible means of finding out how local authorities organise their benefit administration and how relevant managers view current policy and regulations, as well as future initiatives and changes. The frequency with which the Omnibus is conducted, combined with the relatively short time-scale for reporting means that it is a useful vehicle for providing the Department with feedback on issues that are current and relevant at the time. By conducting one regular survey the Department is seeking to reduce the number of individual surveys that local authority managers are involved in and as such reduce the burden on them.

This report presents the findings of Wave 9 of the Omnibus and covers questions on the following issues:

- Quarterly Monitoring Reports
- Subsidy System
- Help Team Toolkit
- Security Against Fraud and Error
- Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework
- Fraud and Error: Joint Working
- SOL Prosecutions
- Programmes Protection Working Party
- Security BVPI No.76
- Benefit Fraud Inspectorate
- Appeals

Respondents were also asked about the status of their local authority in terms of de-centralisation and outsourcing.

4 Quarterly Monitoring Reports

4.1 Introduction

On a quarterly basis, since April 2002, the DWP has sent a Quarterly Monitoring Report to the Chief Executive of each local authority. The Report shows the performance of the local authority's administration of HB/CTB in terms of six key indicators i) Average time taken processing new claims ii) Average time taken processing change of circumstances iii) percentage of renewal claims processed on time iv) percentage of cases calculated correctly v) percentage of new claims decided within 14 days of receipt of the LA receiving the necessary information vi) percentage of new rent allowance claims paid where the first payment is made on time. This section of the report examines local authorities' awareness and use of the Reports, as well as their attitudes to them.

4.2 Awareness and Use of Reports

Almost all local authorities (97%) were aware of the Quarterly Monitoring Reports. Among the eight authorities that were not aware, were five English districts, two London Boroughs and one English Unitary authority.

Fifteen per cent of authorities said that the Chief Executive does not pass the Reports on to anyone else (decreasing to four per cent of English Metropolitan districts). A further 19% did not know whether it is distributed elsewhere or not. On the other hand, as the table below shows, overall, two out of three Chief Executives (66%) pass the Reports to another officer or member. Interestingly however, only a quarter of Chief Executives pass the Reports to the Member with responsibility for Housing Benefit (26%) and/or Members of the Benefits portfolio (23%) and even fewer distribute it to the Leader of the Council or the Director of Finance (both 19%).

Table 1 **Distribution of Reports**

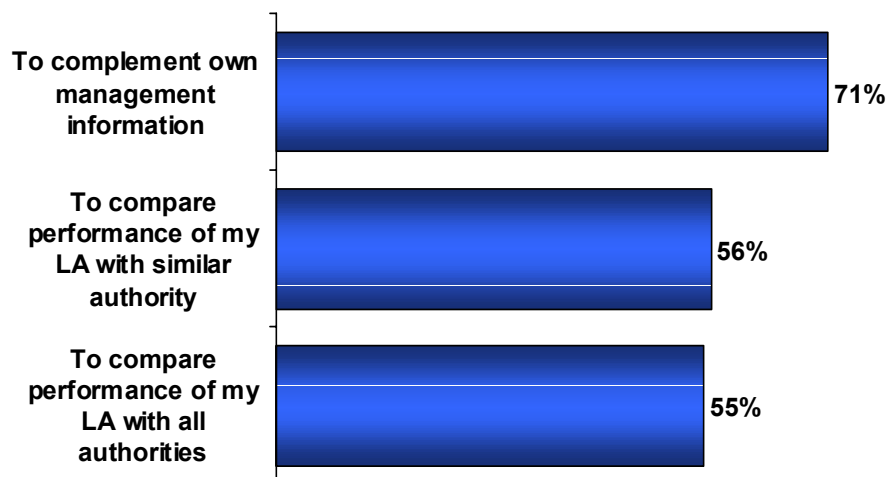
	%
Distributed to officer/member:	66
Member with responsibility for Housing Benefit	26
Members of the Benefits portfolio	23
Leader of the Council	19
Head/Director of Finance	19
Senior Officers Management Team	7
Director of Housing	2
Assistant Director	2
Corporate Services Director	2
Revenues Manager	1
Treasurer	1
Scrutiny Committee	
Other	3
Not distributed to anyone else	15
Don't know	19

Base: All aware of QM Reports (281)

Despite this apparently fairly low level of distribution, 85% of respondents said that they have made use of the Reports, suggesting that they may be used more by middle, rather than senior, managers.

As the chart below shows, it would seem that the Reports are being used by respondents mostly to complement their own management information (71% of those who have used them), as well as to compare the performance of their authority with similar (56%), and all (55%), authorities. In addition, just four per cent use the Reports to keep staff and members informed. There are no real differences in usage according to local authority type, although Welsh authorities (36% Wales) are significantly less likely to compare their authority against all authorities than, for example, Scottish authorities and English Metropolitan districts (79% and 71% respectively).

Use of QM Reports



4.3 Usefulness of Reports

Respondents were overall very positive about the Reports in terms of how useful they are, with nearly nine in ten describing them as very (30%) or fairly (59%) useful. On the other hand, one in ten (10%) said they are not very useful and two per cent that they are not at all useful. Although the proportion of authorities with a negative opinion is fairly low, it is worth pointing out that London Boroughs, English Districts and Scottish authorities were most likely to describe the Reports as not useful (15%, 13% and 13%).

4.4 Overall Attitudes to Reports

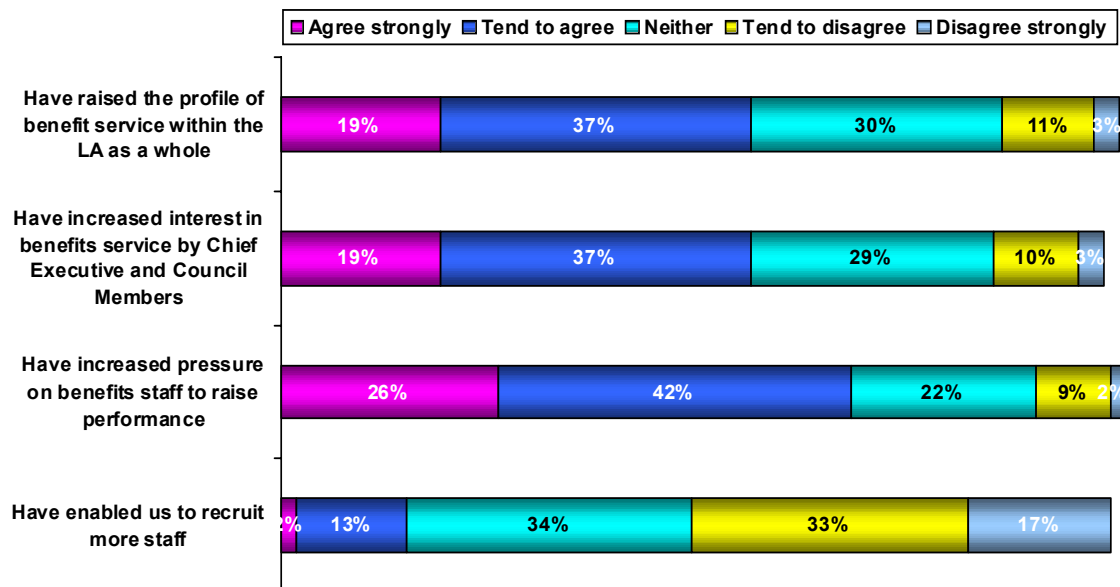
Respondents were given a series of statements and were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each one. As the chart below indicates, over half (56%) believe that the Reports have raised the profile of the benefit service within the local authority as a whole. Welsh authorities were most positive, with 85% agreeing that it has increased the profile. On the other hand, 30% neither agreed nor disagreed and 14% disagreed that the Reports have increased the profile; this feeling is particularly strong among English Metropolitan Districts (28%).

Just over half (56%) also agreed that the Reports have increased interest in the benefits service by the Chief Executive and Council Members. Almost three in ten (29%) neither agreed nor disagreed (rising to 46% of Welsh authorities) and 13% actually disagreed with the statement. Once again, Metropolitan authorities are most negative, with 28% saying they disagreed that it has increased the level of interest.

Around two-thirds of authorities (68%) were in agreement that the Reports have increased the pressure on benefits staff to raise performance, with this figure increasing to 85% of Welsh authorities and decreasing to 45% of London Boroughs. Of the remainder, most said that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement (22%), rather than actually disagreed (11%). Once again, the proportion disagreeing with the statement is highest among English Metropolitan authorities.

The final statement related to staff recruitment and whether or not the reports have enabled authorities to recruit more staff. Half of respondents (50%) disagreed that the Reports have made it possible for them to recruit more staff (increasing to 75% of London Boroughs), while a third (34%) neither agreed nor disagreed. On the other hand, one in six (15%) agreed that the Reports have enabled them to recruit more staff, rising to 31% of Welsh authorities.

Attitudes towards QM Reports



4.5 Impact of Reports

Respondents were asked to make an overall assessment of the Reports in terms of the impact they have had on the benefits department overall. A majority of 59% described it as having a positive impact, with this rising to 74% of Scottish authorities and decreasing to 38% of Welsh authorities. However, a third (32%) said that they have made no difference (46% of Welsh authorities) and eight per cent said that they have had a negative impact (20% of London Boroughs).

Whatever answer respondents gave in terms of impact, they were then asked a follow-up question “why do you say that?” The answers of those who said that the Reports have had a positive impact are shown in the table below:

Table 2 Reasons why the Reports have had a positive impact

	%
Raises profile generally	64
Confirms any performance improvements we have made	59
Staff are much more aware of what we are trying to achieve	50
Enabled us to benchmark performance	50
Raises profile with members	35
Enabled us to introduce target setting	30
Raises morale of staff re' performance	25
Allowed benefits service to address staffing and technology issues	18
Other	4
Don't know/No answer	2

Base: All LAs that said reports have a positive impact (165)

Among the 89 authorities that said the Reports have made no difference in terms of the impact, 42% gave this answer because they do not think that they have raised the profile of the service. Three in ten (30%) said that their staff are largely unconcerned with national comparisons, 15% that the profile of the benefits department is already high and 13% that staff are already aware of their performance level. In addition, seven per cent said that staff are under pressure (due to changes and backlog) and four per cent that members are largely unconcerned with national comparisons.

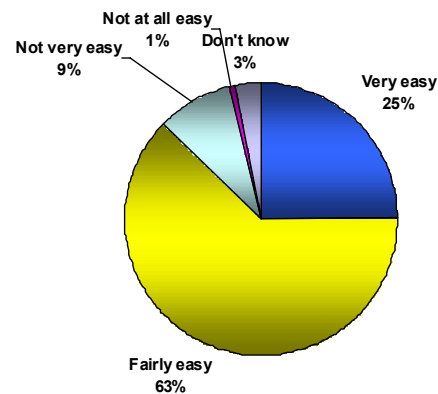
Finally, 22 out of 23 of those who described the Reports as having had a negative impact, cited the fact that staff feel under even more pressure. Thirteen authorities said that they lower the morale of staff in terms of performance.

4.6 Using the QM Statistics on the Internet

A majority of all authorities interviewed (80%) were aware that the statistics from the Reports are available on the internet. However, this does leave 18% of authorities that did not know about it and two per cent that were not sure. London Boroughs would seem to be the least well informed, with 68% saying that they were aware and 27% that they did not know the statistics are available on the internet.

Among those local authorities that are aware the statistics are published on the internet, two in three (67%) have used them, 21% have not used them and 12% are not sure. Those authorities that have used the statistics were very positive about them, with 88% saying that they are easy to use (25% “very” and 63% “fairly”). Just 10% described the statistics as not very (nine per cent) or not at all (one per cent) easy to use. This group of 16 authorities that gave a negative response were asked why they found it difficult. Nine of them said that the site is not easy to navigate, five that the data was not presented in a way that they could make use of, four complained about the search engine and three said that they could not find the data they were looking for.

QM Reports on the Internet



4.7 Interest in receiving database with Report

All authorities aware of the QM reports were asked to state how interested they would be in receiving a database with the Quarterly Monitoring data, which allows you to produce your own tailor-made analysis of these statistics. The majority, 87% in fact, said that they were interested in this possibility. Approximately half (47%) said that they were very interested and a further two in five (40%) said that they were fairly interested.

5 Subsidy System

5.1 Introduction

In April 2003, as part of a wider review of housing benefit, changes were made to the subsidy system. The main change means that from 2003-04 DWP will pay all housing benefit/council tax benefit administration subsidy. Previously, DWP paid 50% and the other 50% was paid by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (in England), the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly. The change was made under a commitment by the government in March 2002 that no family with children would remain in bed and breakfast accommodation – except in an emergency – after March 2004. A reduced subsidy rate in respect of bed and breakfast cases supports this commitment by providing more subsidy when an LA uses better quality accommodation. This is part of the government's efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion.

This section of the report assesses local authorities' understanding of, and attitudes to, these changes.

5.2 Understanding of Changes to Subsidy System

Authorities would appear to have a fairly good understanding of the changes to the subsidy system. A majority of LAs 83% described the changes as clear, although most of these said they are fairly (57%), rather than very (26%), clear. These very positive findings are found across all local authority types, although it should be pointed out that Scottish authorities seem particularly clear about the changes, with all but one describing them as clear.

On the other hand, 14% of authorities described the changes as not very clear and one per cent said they are not at all clear, with London Boroughs slightly more likely to say that they are not clear (32%).

The reasons for the 45 authorities describing the changes as not clear range from there being not enough information provided (47%) to a different section deals with subsidy issues (47%) and the circulars not being very clear (24%).

5.3 The Changes in terms of Transparency

Most authorities (79%) agree that the changes have helped to improve the transparency of funding of subsidy arrangements. Just four per cent said that they have not improved transparency and 17% were unable to give an answer either way. Once again, all but one Scottish authority gave a positive response.

The 60 authorities that said the new subsidy arrangements do not improve transparency or did not give an answer, were asked why they said this. Sixty per cent cited the fact that a different part of the council deals with subsidy issues, 15% said that the process is complex and five per cent that it is too soon to judge.

5.4 Comparing Subsidy Changes with Previous Arrangements

Just over three-quarters described the changes as an improvement on previous arrangements, with this rising to 92% of English Metropolitan Districts and 91% of Scottish authorities. Just one per cent of authorities said that the changes are not an improvement, while the remainder (21%) did not know.

The reasons why respondents think the changes are an improvement are shown in the table below:

Table 3 Reasons why the changes are an improvement

	%
All the funding is from one source	80
Only have to deal with one government department	52
More appropriate for DWP to maintain control of all subsidy	51
Clearer/more transparent	39
Unclear what the rate support grant element was before	34
Previous arrangements were complex	34
Other	2
Don't know	2

Base: All who say the changes are an improvement (223)

6 Help Team Toolkit

6.1 Introduction

The Help Team Toolkit CD Rom was issued to local authorities in July 2002. It is a compilation of tools developed by the DWP Help Team, working with LAs. Councils can use the Toolkit to analyse the way they administer HB/CTB and work out the best way to make improvements.

The toolkit had a Ministerial launch in July 2002 and copies were sent free of charge to Chief Executives and Benefit Managers of all local authorities. The toolkit is intended to equip LAs with a means to help in diagnosing areas of weakness in Housing Benefit Service. It can also be used to help manage change within the service, to provide guidance on dealing with common issues, improve the way benefits are administered and to help meet acceptable performance standards.

6.2 Awareness and Use of Toolkit

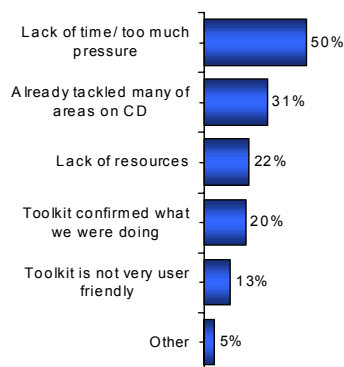
Nine out of ten local authorities (91%) participating in the Survey were aware of the Help Team Toolkit CD Rom. It is interesting to note that both Scottish (100%) and English Metropolitan (96%) authorities were significantly more likely to be aware than English Unitary authorities (83%).

Among the authorities aware of the Toolkit, only four out of ten (40%) had actually used it, leaving 58% that had not used it and two per cent that were unsure. Lack of time/too much pressure was the most commonly cited problem, with 50% of authorities reporting this. The next most frequently mentioned reasons were that the authorities' own policy/training unit tackled many of the areas (31%), lack of resources (22%), toolkit confirmed what they were already doing (20%) and the toolkit not being user friendly (13%). (see the Chart below).

The Help Team Toolkit: Awareness and Use

- 91% aware of Toolkit
- 40% of LAs have used Toolkit

Why has your LA not used it?



Base: All who have not used Toolkit (152)

Local authorities HB/CTB caseload level would seem to have an effect on authorities' reasons for not using the toolkit. The significant reasons are stated below:

- authorities with high HB/CTB caseloads are more likely to cite own policy/and training unit have tackled many of the areas on the CD (46%) as the main reason compared to authorities with low caseloads (15%)
- authorities with low caseloads are more likely to cite lack of resources (33%) compared to authorities with high case loads (17%)
- authorities with low caseloads are more likely to cite lack of time/too much pressure (58%) as the reason compared to authorities with high case loads (39%)

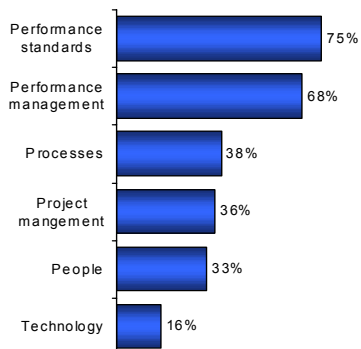
6.3 *Parts of the Toolkit Used*

Of the local authorities that had used the Toolkit, Performance Standards was the most commonly used section, with three out of four authorities using it (75%). Performance Management (68%) closely followed this. The Processes (38%), Project Management (36%) and People (33%) sections were all used to a fairly similar level, with the Technology section being the least used (16%). It is interesting to note that London Borough authorities did not use the People or the Technology sections at all.

The Help Team Toolkit: Awareness and Use

- 91% aware of Toolkit
- 40% of LAs have used Toolkit

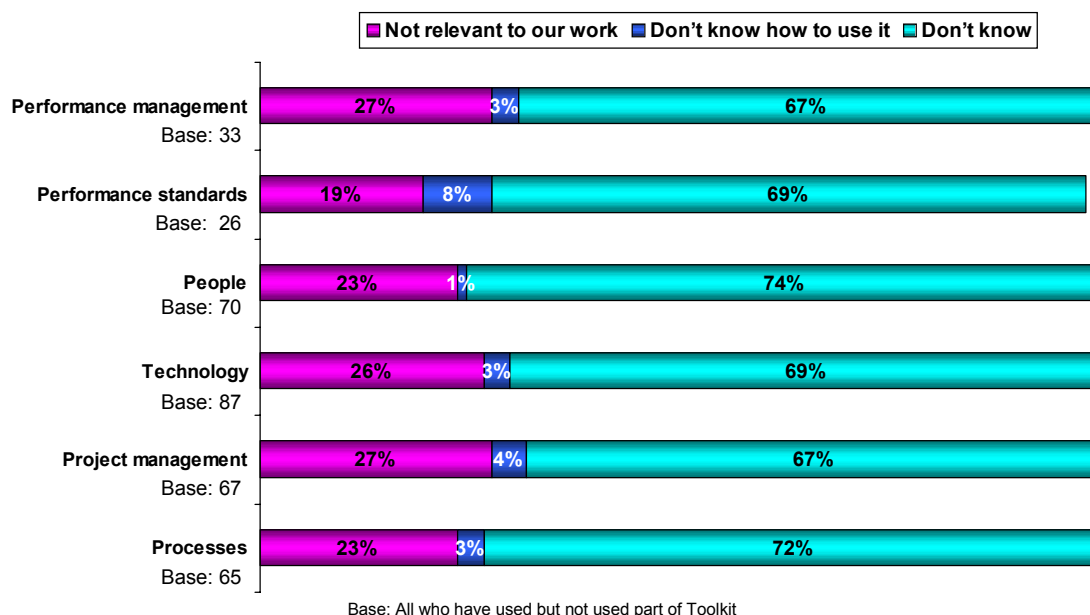
Which parts has your LA used?



Base: All LA's who have used Toolkit (104)

Of the local authorities that had used the toolkit, 42 per cent were trying to resolve problems. The most common problem was a backlog of claims, with just over one in four (27%) authorities citing this. Other reasons also mentioned were Customer Service Improvements (five per cent), Training of staff (four per cent and Performance Standards/Management (four per cent).

Reasons for not using Toolkit



The main reasons for not using certain sections of the toolkit can be seen in the chart above.

Of the local authorities that had used the Toolkit, 38% did not want any additional tools added and over half of authorities were unsure (51%). This left only ten authorities that would like to see other tools added. Their suggestions were:

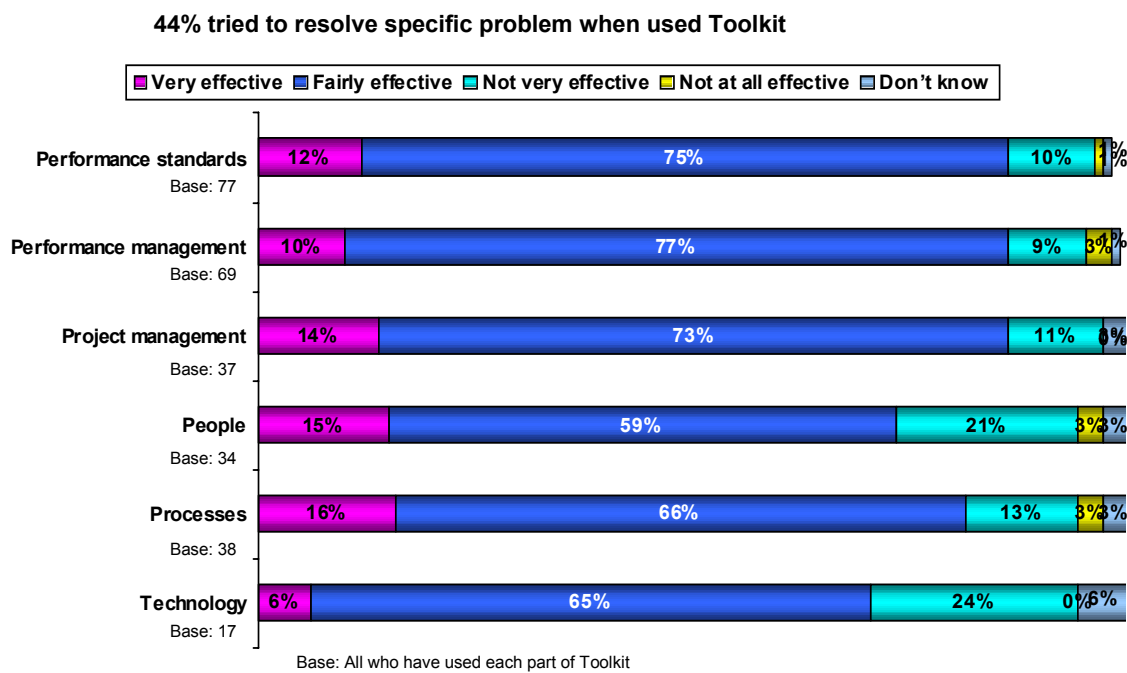
- “Gear some of it to very small authorities”
- “Tools for data analysis related to specific software packages”
- “Sample process mapping and associated information”
- “Subsidy guide or tools assisting with validation of information used to compile a claim”
- “More information on best practice and good ideas which have worked elsewhere or been used by the help team or PIATs to improve performance in other local authorities”
- “Detailed examples of how other local authorities’ problems have been identified and resolved – specific examples”
- “Good practice on staff targets and monitoring to provide a national benchmark for staff performance”
- “Subsidy claim compilation”
- “More model documents”

- “Performance Management”

6.4 Effectiveness of the Toolkit

The ratings for the effectiveness of the various sections of the toolkits were very high. As can be seen in the chart below, Performance Standards (88%), Project Management (87%) and Performance Management (87%) were all rated very highly. These were followed by the Processes section, with 82%. Although both the People section and the Technology section were rated highly, they were considered to be much less effective than the other sections (74% and 71% effective respectively).

Effectiveness of Toolkit



The main reasons for the sections not being considered effective are listed in the Table below. Due to the very small base sizes the figures shown in this table are actual numbers instead of percentages.

Table 4 : Reasons for saying Toolkit is not effective

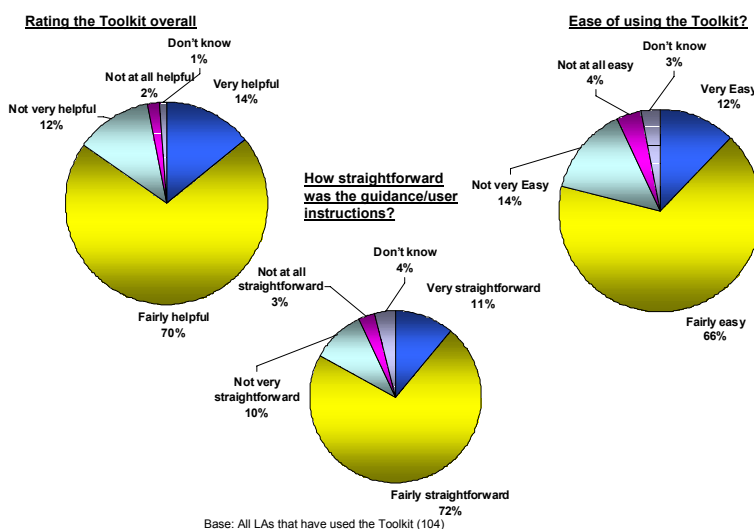
	Performance Management (Base: 8)	Performance Standards (Base:9)	People (Base:8)	Technology (Base: 4)	Project Management (Base:4)	Processes (Base: 6)
	N	N	N	N	N	N
It summarised information already available and being used/ nothing new	4	5	2	1	1	1
Not user friendly/ not easy to follow	3	1	1	-	-	1
Not able to access all parts of the toolkit	1	1	1	1	1	1
It is geared to larger authorities/we are small	1	1	1	1	1	1
Some of the information wasn't useful	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lacked specific information	-	1	1	1	1	1
Other		1	4	1	1	1

6.5 Attitudes to the Toolkit

Overall eighty four per cent of authorities rated the toolkit as helpful (14% as very helpful and 70% as helpful). This leaves 12% finding it not very helpful and only two authorities that found it not at all helpful. It is interesting to note that Welsh and Scottish authorities found it significantly more helpful than their London Borough counterparts.

Overall ease of navigation was rated highly. Among the authorities that had used the toolkit, almost eight out of ten found it easy to navigate (12% very easy and 66% fairly easy). This leaves 14% of authorities finding it not very easy and only four authorities that found it not at all easy. Similar high results can be seen for straightforwardness of the toolkit guide and user instructions. Eighty three per cent of authorities thought that they were straightforward (11% very straightforward and 72% fairly straightforward). One in ten authorities (10%) found that it was not very straightforward and three authorities thought it was not at all straightforward.

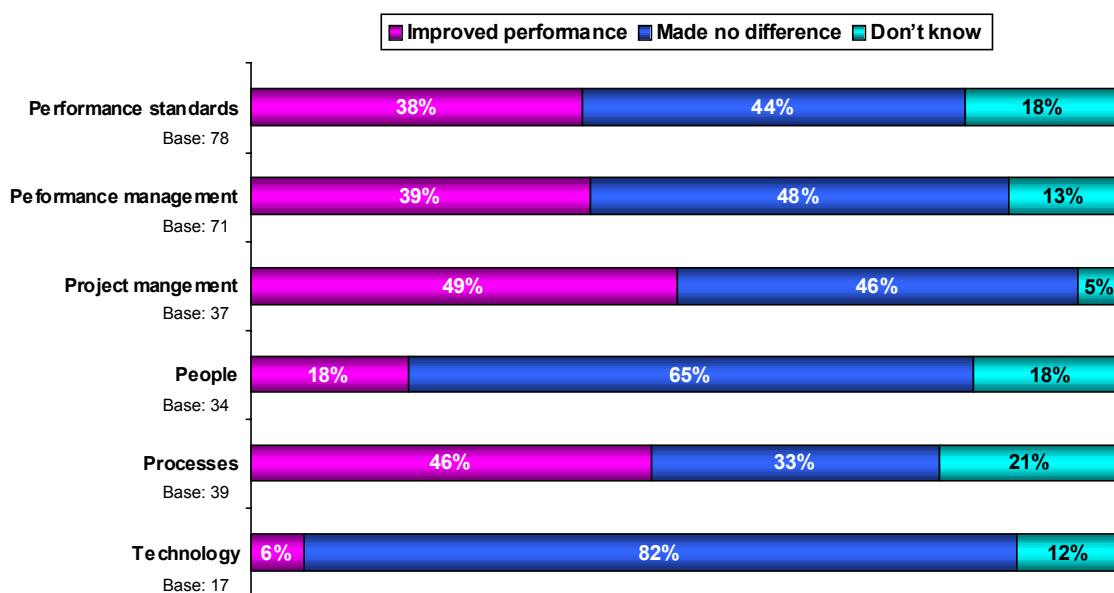
Satisfaction with Toolkit



6.6 Improving Performance

The local authorities that had used the various parts of the toolkit were asked to rate whether the sections had improved their performance or made no difference. As can be seen in the chart below, the Project Management Section was the most effective at improving performance, with almost one in two (49%) authorities rating an improvement. This was closely followed by the Processes section, where 46% of authorities reported that it had improved performance. Among the authorities that had used the Performance Management and Performance Standards section of the toolkit, almost four out of ten reported an improvement (39% and 38% respectively). The least effective sections were the People and Technology sections where figures for improvement were very poor. Only six authorities thought that the People section had improved performance and only one authority thought that the Technology section had.

Toolkit and Performance



Base: All who have used each part of Toolkit

6.7 Interest in the Toolkit

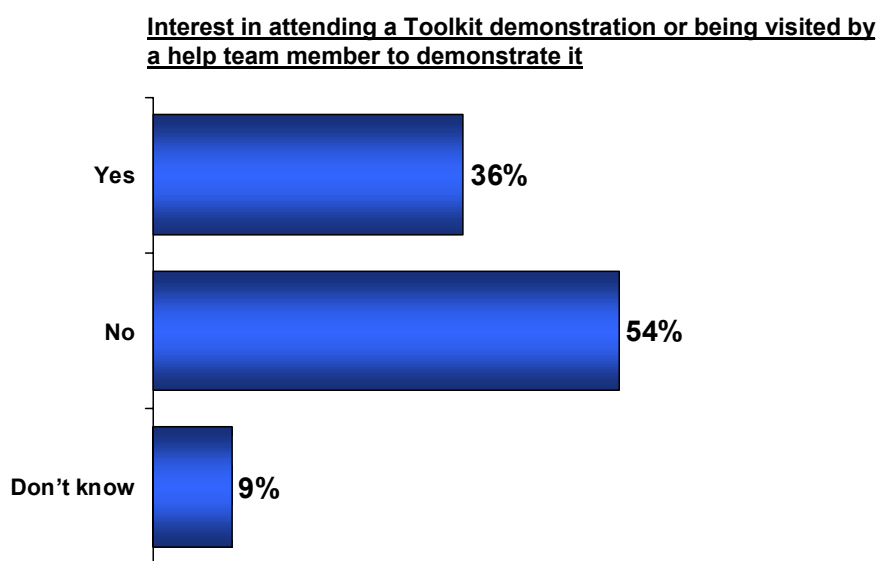
The local authorities that were not aware of the toolkit, were asked how interested they would be in receiving a copy of it on CD Rom and whether they would like to have a demonstration or be visited by a Help Team member.

General levels of interest in receiving the CD Rom were very high, with ninety one per cent showing some level of interest (65% very interested and 26% fairly interested). Only one authority said they were not at all interested and one was unsure.

Levels of interest in a demonstration or visit by a Help Team member were lower. Only 36% of authorities reported “yes” they would like to be visited.

Interest in Toolkit

- 15 out of 23 LAs that are not aware of the Toolkit are very interested in receiving a copy



Base: All

7 Changes to the Verification Framework and the Security against Fraud and Error schemes in April 2004

7.1 Introduction

Tackling fraud and abuse in the benefits system continues to be a high priority for the government. The Security Against Fraud and Error incentive scheme rewards LAs for identifying and acting on fraud and error in their HB caseload. This was introduced across Great Britain in April 2002. Further changes will be introduced in April 2004.

In the survey, Local Authorities were asked about the enhanced data-matching and risk-based interventions that will be incorporated into the VF scheme from April 2004, and the changes also being made to the SAFE scheme. This section of the report details levels of awareness of those changes and the clarity of the information that was issued to local authorities about the changes. It also comments on the preparations for the changes that are being made and the confidence of local authorities to make the necessary preparations in time for April 2004.

7.2 Awareness of the Changes

The majority of local authorities (96%) were aware of the impending changes and the information issued so far relating to the SAFE and VF schemes. A similarly high majority (96%) of those authorities aware of the changes and current information said that they had seen the information issued about these changes. This equates to 93% of the total sample claiming to have seen the information issued so far.

7.3 Clarity of Information Issued

Most of the local authorities in the sample (just over three in five – 63%) thought the information was clear - five per cent thought it very clear and 58% fairly clear. There were some marked differences between regions for this issue. For instance a high majority (86%) of the local authorities in the South West region said they thought the information was clear compared to just half of local authorities from the South East and the North West regions (both 50%) and 53% of authorities in Yorks. and Humber.

Table 5: Opinion of clarity of information by region

	All clear (very clear + fairly clear) %	All not clear (All not very clear + not at all clear) %
Total	63	36
Scotland (22)	59	41
North East (13)	69	31
Yorks & Humberside (15)	53	47
North West (30)	50	47
East Midlands (28)	72	29
West Midlands (25)	68	32
East (34)	68	32
South East (38)	50	47
South West (28)	86	14
London (21)	57	34
Wales (11)	55	45

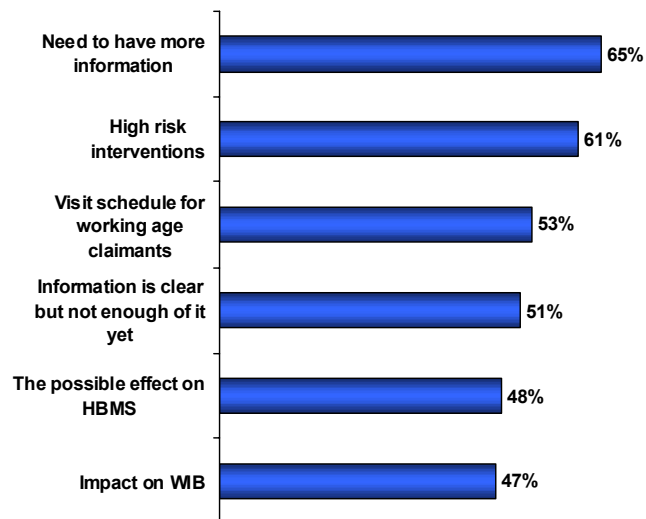
Base: All who have seen information about the changes (265)

The third or so of local authorities (36%) who thought that the information about the changes was unclear were asked to specify what needs further clarification. Two thirds or so (65%) simply said that they 'need to have more clarification'. Of the more specific responses, 'high risk interventions' was the area most likely to be cited as needing more clarification (61% mentioned this). Around half (53%) said that the visit schedule for working age claimants needed more clarification and a similar amount (51%) said that the information was 'clear but not enough of it yet'. Just fewer than a half (48%) mentioned the possible effect on HBMS and the impact on WIB (47%) as needing more clarification.

Security against Fraud and Error (SAFE)

- 96% aware of changes and information
- 93% seen information that has been issued

What do you think needs further clarification?



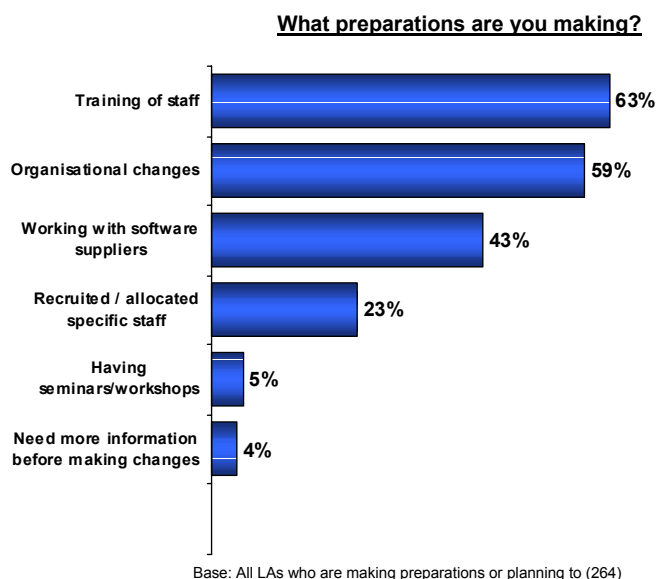
Base: All who have seen information about changes

7.4 Preparations for Change

Almost all local authorities that are aware of the changes are either already making preparations that will come into effect in April 2004 (29%) or planning to make preparations (66%), so the vast majority, 95% are active in this way. All authorities that are either making or planning to make preparations for the changes were asked to state the activities involved. For the main these preparations are focused on training of staff on the changes required (63%) and organisational changes to cope with the new regime (59%). Other preparations included working with software supplier on changes required, mentioned by around two in five (43%) and also recruiting or allocating specific staff to deal with the changes (23%).

Preparations for changes

- Almost all that are aware of changes are already making preparations (29%) or are planning to (66%)



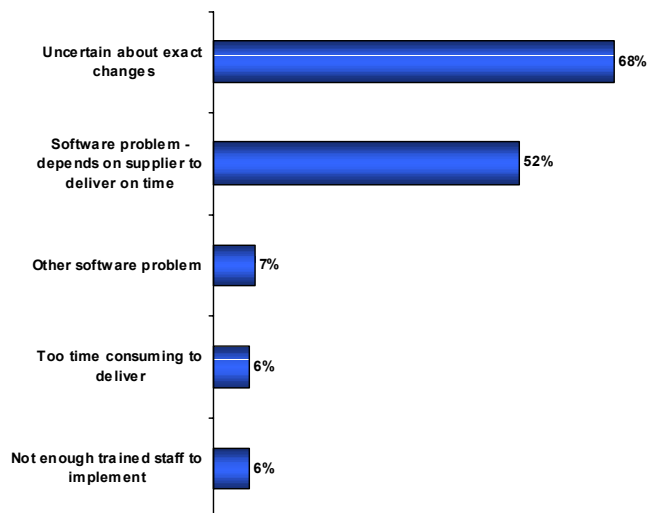
7.5 Confidence about Implementing Changes

The majority of local authorities, 85% in fact, were confident to some extent that their authority would be able to implement any changes to SAFE/VF in April 2004. However it should be pointed out that of that number just 14% said that they were very confident that their local authority would be able to implement the changes to SAFE in April.

Local authorities that were anything other than very confident were asked why they were not totally confident about implementing the changes. Main reasons for the lack of confidence appear to be uncertainty about the changes required (68%) cited by two thirds or so of this group and anxieties over whether their software supplier could deliver on time mentioned by half (52%). A further six per cent mentioned other software issues (three per cent said the software is about to change anyway/new benefit system coming in and another three per cent said software will need to be upgraded/changed/have to specify).

Confidence about Implementing Changes

Why not confident



Base: All fairly/not very/not at all confident (229)

All local authorities mentioning software problems as a reason why they are not confident about implementing the changes were asked if their local authority had tried to resolve this/these software problems with their supplier. A quarter or so (27%) said that they had taken these problems up with their supplier and a further three in five (62%) said that although they had not done so yet they plan to do so.

8 Registered Social Landlord Verification Framework

8.1 Introduction

A pilot to test the effectiveness of using RSLs to collect evidence required for the Verification Framework on behalf of LAs started at the beginning of October 2001 and ended at the end of June 2002. The pilot was set up by the DWP in partnership with the Housing Corporation, the National Assembly for Wales and Communities Scotland. It aimed to see how far RSL VF would free up local authority (LA) resources, improve RSL cash flow and ensure a quality service to all claimants. In total, 12 pilot areas participated in the scheme. The pilot was evaluated to find out how far the scheme had met its aims and objectives, so that a decision could be made on whether to extend the scheme on a longer term, national basis.

The recommendation following the evaluation of the pilot was that the scheme should be extended. An announcement of its national extension on a voluntary basis was made on 1 November 2002.

The scheme is part of an overall package of measures intended to improve the administration of HB/CTB.

8.2 Awareness of Verification Framework

The majority of local authorities, 94% were aware of the RSL (Registered Social Landlord) Verification Framework (VF) Scheme. It is interesting to note however that there was a significant difference between awareness levels of those local authorities which are fully or partially compliant (98% and 96% respectively) and non VF local authorities of whom a lower number, nearer to three quarters (78%) were aware of the scheme.

Table 6 : Awareness of the RSL VF scheme by VF Status

	Total	VF Status		
		Fully compliant (213) %	Partially compliant (25) %	Non VF LA (51) %
Yes	94	98	96	78
No	6	2	4	22

Base : All (289)

8.3 Plans to Apply for scheme

Around a third (32%) of local authorities that were aware of the scheme said their authority was planning to apply for the RSL VF scheme. It is interesting to note that there were significantly more of the partially compliant authorities saying that they were planning to apply for the scheme. Half of this group (50%) were planning to apply. This is in contrast to the much lower number, just eight per cent, of non VF local authorities that said that they were planning to apply for the scheme.

Table 7: Plans to apply for the RSL VF scheme by VF Status

	Total	VF Status		
		Fully compliant (209) %	Partially compliant (24) %	Non VF LA (40) %
Yes	32	34	50	8
No	52	51	46	65
Don't know	16	15	4	28

Base: All aware of the RSL VF scheme (273)

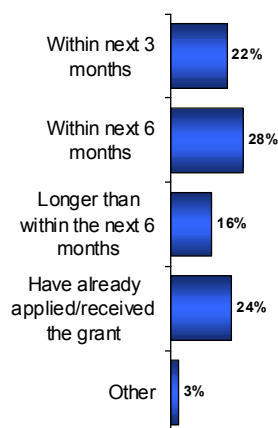
The eighty-six authorities that said that they were planning to apply for the set up grant were asked when this application was going to happen. The timescale for this for half of the authorities was within the next 6 months (22% within next three months and 28% within three to six months). Sixteen per cent said that they were planning to apply for this grant in more than six months time. Of the 86 authorities that were planning to apply for the grant, the majority; 71 were fully compliant, twelve were partially compliant and three were non VF local authorities. There were no significant differences between the different status authorities for this finding.

A quarter or so (24%) of authorities stated that they had already applied for or received the grant. None of these findings differ significantly by VF status, although out of the three Non VF local authorities that are planning to apply for the scheme, none are going to apply within the next three months (one within 6 months, one longer than 6 months and one did not know).

The Registered Social Landlord (RSL) Verification Framework Scheme

- 94% are aware of RSL verification framework scheme

When is your LA planning to apply for the set up grant?



Base: All LA's planning to apply for the scheme (86)

The 143 authorities that said they are not planning to apply for the RSL VF scheme were asked to state their reasons for not applying. Cost and resource implications were mentioned by around three in ten (29%) of this group. The same proportion (29%) said that their reason for not applying was that landlords collecting the rent should not be the ones verifying it. Other reasons, each mentioned by around a fifth of the authorities that said they were not planning to apply for the scheme were that they were not aware of any benefits of the scheme (20%) or were concerned about increase in fraud (20%). One in ten (10%) said that they had had a 'poor response from RSLs/not interested'. Not surprisingly, the main reason stated by Non VF local authorities for not applying is that they are not compliant (88%), although 19% also mentioned the cost implications.

9 Fraud and error: Joint working

9.1 Introduction

As part of the government's drive to tackle fraud and abuse in the benefits system, LAs are asked to work jointly with other relevant public service organisations. In the survey, LAs were asked about their experience of joint working in terms of fraud and error issues. It was made clear to local authorities that by joint working it was meant over and above day-to-day joint working required in the administration of Housing Benefit. The four organisations that local authorities were asked to comment on in terms of joint working were Jobcentre Plus, other LAs, the Inland Revenue and the Pensions Service. LAs were also asked about the effectiveness of joint working with each of these organisations in relation to three specific processes: identifying fraud, obtaining data in relation to fraud and error and improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error.

9.2 Frequency of Joint Working

Authorities were far more likely to work with Jobcentre Plus and with other local authorities than with the Inland Revenue or the Pensions Service. For instance two in five (41%) of authorities never work with the Inland Revenue and almost half (47%) said that they never work with the Pensions Service. In comparison, just four per cent of authorities said that they never work with Jobcentre Plus and 17% never work with other local authorities.

Overall authorities appear to work most frequently with Jobcentre Plus (a quarter or so doing so daily, 26%) and a further fifth (20%) working jointly with them 2 to 3 times per week. It is perhaps understandable to note that local authorities with a medium or high caseload were significantly more likely to work jointly with Jobcentre Plus on a daily basis (33% medium caseload and 32% high caseload) than those authorities with a low caseload, just 13% of this group work daily with the Jobcentre Plus. Three per cent of local authorities work on a daily basis with the Inland Revenue, five per cent work daily with the Pensions Service and six per cent work daily with other local authorities.

Table 8 : Frequency of Joint Working with other organisations for issues relating to fraud and error

	Jobcentre Plus %	Other LAs %	Inland Revenue %	Pensions Service %
Daily	26	6	3	5
2 to 3 times per week	20	13	5	6
Weekly	17	17	10	8
Monthly	26	38	28	20
Never	4	17	41	47
Don't know	7	9	13	15

Base : All (289)

9.3 Effectiveness of Joint Working with Jobcentre Plus

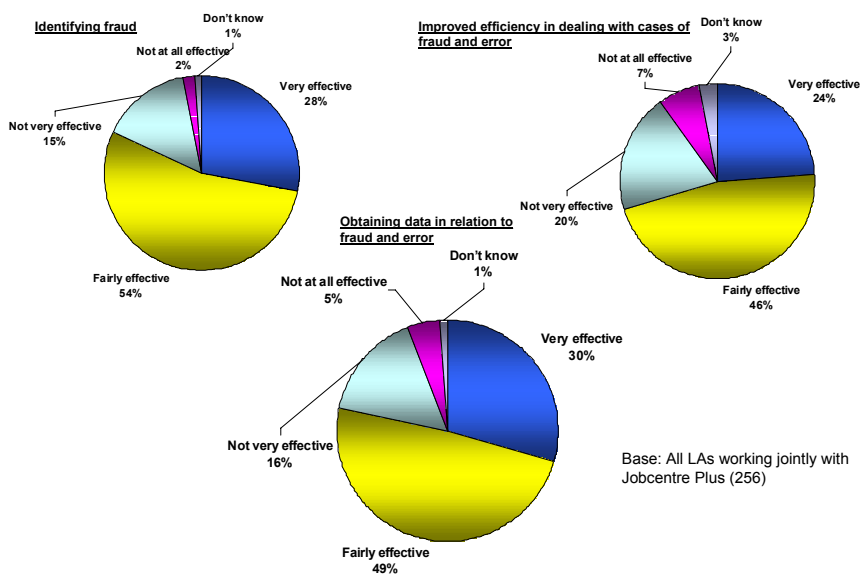
Local authorities were also asked about the effectiveness of joint working with each of the organisations in turn in relation to specific processes. The following sections report on these findings.

9.3.1 Effectiveness of Joint Working with Jobcentre Plus

Firstly looking at joint working between local authorities and Jobcentre plus, and how effective the joint working was in terms of three aspects: identifying fraud, obtaining data in relation to fraud and error and improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error. For all these processes the joint working relationship appeared to be a positive one, with approximately three quarters or more stating the process to be effective in each case.

The chart below illustrates these findings. Four fifths (82%) said that joint working between local authorities and Jobcentre Plus was effective for identifying fraud, three in ten (28%) saying it was very effective and 54% saying it was fairly effective. A similarly high majority (79%) said joint working with Jobcentre Plus was either very (30%) or fairly (49%) effective in terms of obtaining data in relation to fraud and error. Slightly fewer, but still a considerable majority, of seven in ten (71%) of those authorities that work with Jobcentre Plus said that this way of working was either very (24%) or fairly (46%) effective in terms of improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error.

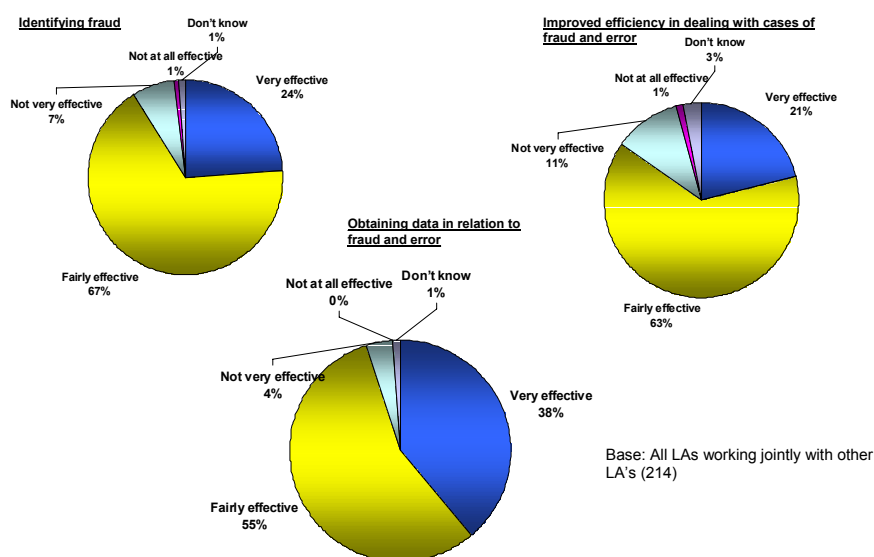
Effectiveness of Working Jointly With Jobcentre Plus



9.3.2 Effectiveness of Joint Working with Other Local Authorities

Joint working between local authorities appears to be effective for all three processes. It appears to be a particularly effective way of working for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error: 94% said joint working for this process was effective (38% very effective and 56% fairly effective). Nine in ten (91%) of those authorities that work jointly with other local authorities said that they found it effective in terms of identifying fraud. Slightly fewer, 84%, said it was effective in terms of improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error.

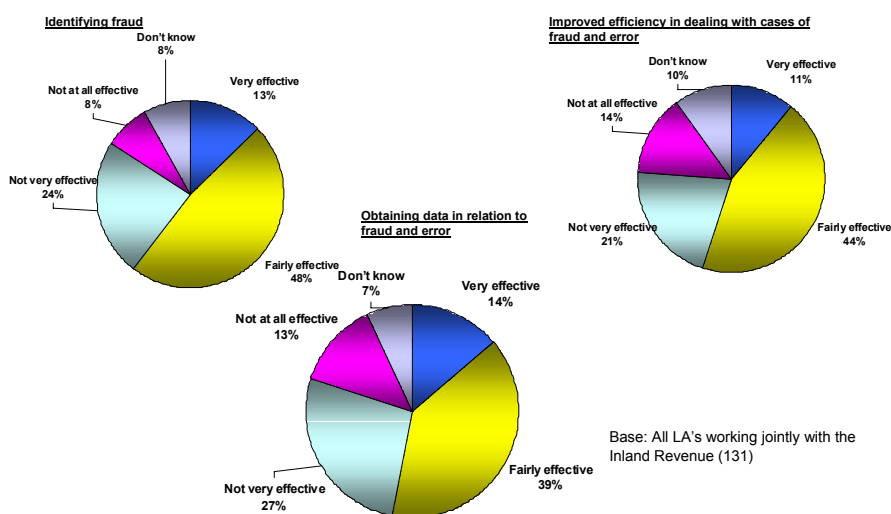
Effectiveness of Working Jointly With Other LAs



9.3.3 Effectiveness of Joint Working with Inland Revenue

Joint working with the Inland Revenue was regarded as effective by the majority of those local authorities who worked in this way but the ratings were lower than those associated with working with Jobcentre plus or other local authorities. Three in five (61%) said that joint working with the Inland Revenue was effective in terms of identifying fraud. Just over half (53%: 14% very effective and 39% fairly effective) stated this kind of joint working was effective for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error. Similar numbers said that the process was effective in terms of improved efficiency in dealing with cases of fraud and error (55% either very (11%) or fairly (44%) effective).

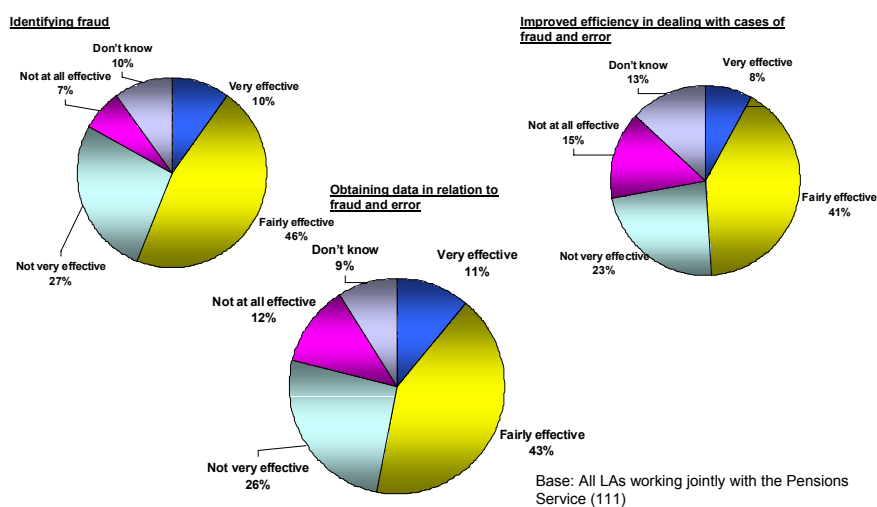
Effectiveness of Working Jointly With Inland Revenue



9.3.4 Effectiveness of Joint Working with Pensions Service

Similarly effectiveness of working with the Pensions Service was not rated as highly as joint working with Jobcentre Plus or the Pensions Service. For instance just less than half (49%) thought joint working between local authorities and the Pensions Service was effective in terms of improved efficiency (eight per cent saying very effective and 41% fairly effective). Slightly greater numbers said this combination of organisations joint working activities were effective for obtaining data in relation to fraud and error (53% said effective with 11% saying very effective and 42% fairly effective). Fifty six per cent thought that joint working between local authorities and the Pensions Service was effective in terms of identifying fraud.

Effectiveness of Working Jointly With Pensions Service

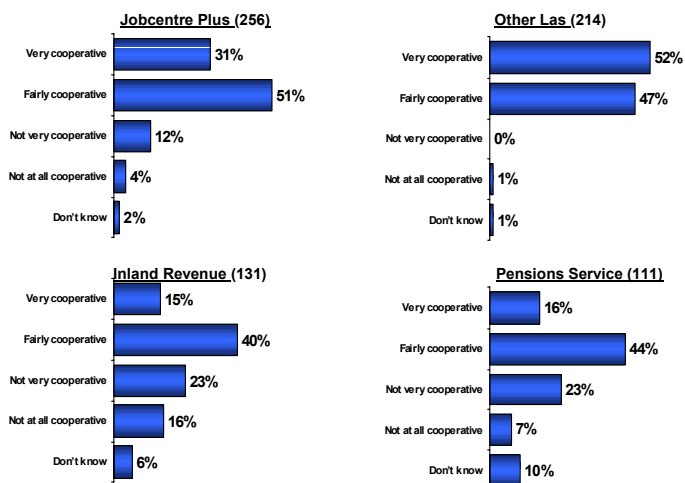


9.4 Providing Information on Time

Local authorities were asked to state how co-operative each of the organisations were in terms of providing the information needed in time. The two organisations that were rated the highest were Jobcentre Plus (82% said they were co-operative with 31% saying very co-operative and 51% saying fairly co-operative). The organisation that was rated most highly in terms of co-operation however was other local authorities. Virtually all (99%) of those local authorities that work with other local authorities said that they found other LAs either very (52%) or fairly (47%) co-operative).

The Pensions service was rated less highly in terms of being co-operative in providing the information needed in time with three in five (60%) saying they were co-operative (16% very and 44% fairly co-operative). The Inland Revenue received the lowest ratings overall in terms of co-operation in providing the information needed in time. Approximately half (55%) thought that the Inland Revenue were co-operative in this way. Authorities with a high caseload were significantly less likely to state that the Inland Revenue were co-operative in providing the information needed from them in time. Just 37% of those authorities with a high caseload found the Inland Revenue co-operative compared to 63% of those with a low caseload and 64% of those with a medium caseload.

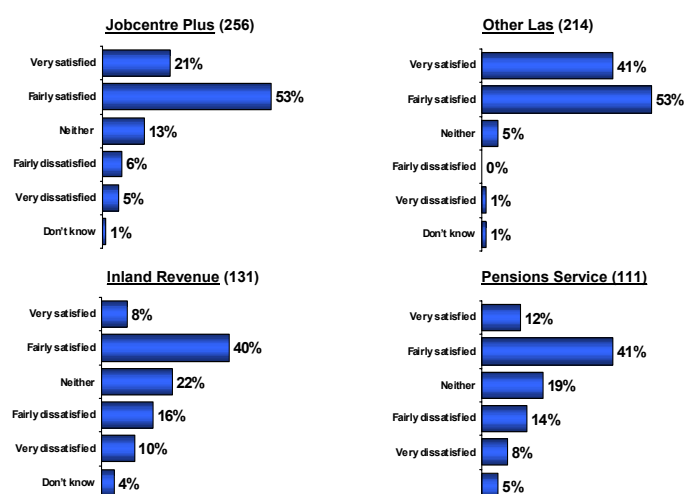
Providing Information on Time



9.5 Overall satisfaction with Service

It is perhaps not surprising then that when local authorities with experience of joint working with other organisations were asked to state how satisfied or dissatisfied they were overall with the service they receive when dealing with them, other local authorities were rated highest. A high majority of 94% said they were either very or fairly satisfied with this way of joint working. Jobcentre Plus were rated well by three quarters of those authorities who have worked jointly with them, 73% said they were very or fairly satisfied. Overall satisfaction with the service received when dealing with the Inland Revenue and the Pensions Service was lower with around half of those local authorities engaged in this way of working saying they were satisfied. Fifty three per cent said they were either very (12%) or fairly (41%) satisfied with the service received from the Pensions Service and slightly fewer (48%) said they were satisfied with the service they receive when dealing with the Inland Revenue. Those authorities with a high caseload were less likely to say they were satisfied with the service they received from the Inland Revenue with just 32% of those with high caseload satisfied compared to 54% with a low and 58% with a medium caseload.

Overall Satisfaction with Service



9.5.1 Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Joint Working Organisation

Local authorities that said that they were dissatisfied with joint working with the organisations asked about in this study were then asked to say why they were not satisfied. The chart below illustrates the answers given to this section of the questionnaire. The length of time it takes to respond to queries appears to be a key factor for dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus (87%) and the Pensions Service (80%). However it must be stressed that the base sizes for these figures are very small and so the findings, although of interest, are not statistically significant.

Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Joint Working Organisation

	Job Centre Plus (30)	Inland Revenue (34)	Pensions Service (25)
	No	No	No
Take too long to respond to queries	26	23	20
Do not answer the telephone	7	9	9
Information provided often incorrect	9	5	9
Doesn't save any time duplicating work	11	8	4
Doesn't want to provide information/reluctant/refuse the information	4	14	5

Base: All LAs not satisfied with service from each organisation

9.6 Plans to Joint Work in the Future

Local authorities that are currently engaged in joint working activities were asked if they plan more joint working in the future, or to carry on at the same level, or less joint working. Very few authorities said that they plan to do less joint working in the future. The majority said that they either plan to do more or keep the amount at the same level. For instance, approximately half (51%) of those authorities that joint work with Jobcentre Plus said that they plan to do more joint working in the future. A similar proportion (48%) said that they plan to do more joint working with the Pensions Service in the future.

Lower numbers, around three in ten (28%) of those authorities that currently work jointly with other local authorities, and also, the Inland Revenue (also 28%), said that they planned to do more joint working in the future. In the case of other local authorities however, it should be noted that the current amount of joint working is relatively high so the scope for increasing this may be perceived as limited. This may go some way to explaining why a substantial number, two thirds or so (68%) of the authorities who currently joint work with other local authorities think that in the future this way of working will stay at the same level.

Table 9 : Future plans for joint working where joint working is already in place

	All LAs who work jointly with.....			
	Jobcentre Plus Base: 256 %	Other LAs Base: 214 %	Inland Revenue Base: 131 %	Pensions Service Base: 111 %
More joint working	51	28	28	48
About the same level	41	68	54	35
Less joint working	5	*	1	3
Don't know	3	4	17	14

Those local authorities that are not currently working jointly with other organisations were asked why they are not involved in this mode of working. The reasons given were wide ranging and in some instances the numbers involved are too small to be of significance. For instance just thirteen local authorities never work with Jobcentre Plus. Four of those thirteen said that the main reason they never work jointly with Jobcentre Plus is that they take too long to respond to queries. Forty-eight local authorities never work with other local authorities. The main reasons given by this group for not working with their fellow authorities is that they have 'not needed to/not come up' (15%), 'little opportunity for this' (15%), and 'doesn't save any time duplicating' (13%).

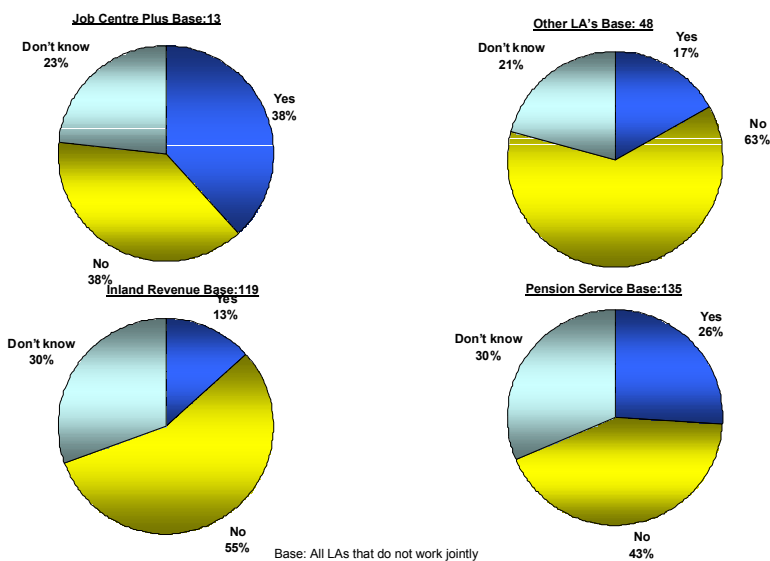
There were greater numbers of authorities that never joint work with the Inland Revenue and the Pensions Service. Amongst the one hundred and nineteen authorities that do not work with the Inland Revenue, the most frequently given reasons for not working in this way were 'poor response from them/not interested' (19%), 'no legal gateway/against confidentiality rules/they won't give any information' (18%), 'take too long to respond to queries' (15%) and 'all manual/no computer links (14%).

The one hundred and thirty five authorities that said that they never joint work with the Pensions Service were most likely to give their reason for not joint working as being 'too soon/it's a new service/not set up yet', mentioned by one in five (19%) of this group. Other less frequently cited reasons for not working with the Pensions Service were 'not needed to/no cases come up' (12%) and 'take too long to respond to queries' (9%).

The groups of authorities that do not currently work with various potential joint working organisations were asked whether they had any plans to start joint working in the future. Jobcentre Plus appears to be the most likely candidate for more joint working in the future but the base size is very small (13) so limited significance can be attached to the figures associated with this sub-group.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a quarter (25%) of those local authorities not currently joint working with the Pensions Service plan to do so in the future. This is greater than the proportion of authorities that do not currently work with other local authorities but plan to joint work with other authorities in the future (17%). Similarly, relatively low numbers, just thirteen per cent of those authorities that do not currently work with the Inland Revenue said that they plan more joint working with this organisation in the future.

Plans to Joint Work



9.7 Liaison Meetings and Forum to Raise Issues Locally

Approximately nine out of ten (87%) of the authorities interviewed said that there were liaison meetings or a forum which their local authority can attend which aims to raise issues between these organisations locally. Where these meetings or a forum exists, all local authorities except one said that someone from their local authority attended at these sessions.

10 SOL Prosecutions

10.1 Introduction

As part of the government's drive against fraud and abuse in the benefits system, since January 2003 LAs have been able to make use of solicitors from DWP's own Solicitors' Branch (SOL Prosecutions) free of charge. In this next section DWP was interested to find out about uptake of this service and how it is viewed by local authorities who use it and also how it is perceived by local authorities who do not use it.

10.2 Outcome of Cases Referred to SOL P

A quarter (25%) of local authorities have referred cases to SOL P for prosecution. Those authorities with high caseloads were significantly less likely to have referred cases to SOL P and less than one in five (18%) of these authorities had referred cases. Authorities with medium caseloads however were more likely to have referred cases to SOL P. Just less than a third (31%) of these authorities had referred cases to SOL P.

The seventy-two local authorities that have referred cases to SOL P, have referred an average of four cases during the period January-September 2003 (range: minimum = 1, maximum = 20). Just over half of these led to prosecution by SOL P. Not surprisingly, there seems to be a relationship between the size of caseload and the number of cases referred. For instance authorities with high caseloads were referring an average of 6.55 cases to SOL P whereas those with a medium caseload referred an average of 3.58 and those with a low caseload referred an average of 2.75 cases.

There were thirty-two local authorities where one or more cases that had been referred to SOL P did not lead to prosecution. These authorities were asked if they had successfully prosecuted any of these cases themselves. Of the thirty-two authorities in this group, half (50%) said that they had not successfully prosecuted any of these cases. Three (nine per cent) said that they had prosecuted one and the same number said that they had prosecuted two cases.

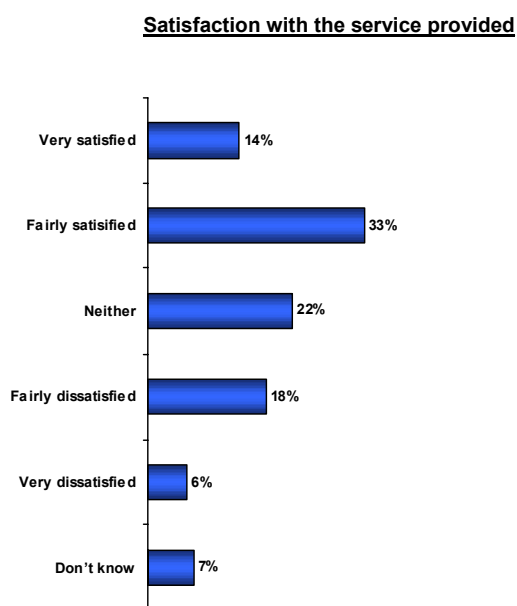
The seventy two authorities that have referred cases to SOL P for prosecution were asked to compare to those cases taken by local authority solicitors for prosecution with those taken by SOL P solicitors and to state whether they thought the ones taken by SOL P lead to more, less or about the same number of prosecutions. Three in ten of this group (28%) thought that cases were less

likely to be prosecuted by SOL P. Fifteen per cent however thought the opposite, that there were fewer cases not prosecuted by SOL P whilst slightly fewer, thirteen per cent thought about the same number of cases were not prosecuted by both types of legal teams. A substantial number (44%) simply could not say.

10.3 Overall Satisfaction with SOL P

Satisfaction with the service provided by SOL P was reasonable with 47% of users saying they were satisfied (14% very satisfied, 33% fairly satisfied). The seventeen authorities that said that they were dissatisfied with the service provided by SOL P were asked to explain why they were dissatisfied. Reasons given included 'will not accept a lot of cases/turn them down for petty reasons (nine of the seventeen), and 'undue delays/slow to review files/reach decisions (eight of the seventeen). The very small bases sizes mean that these finding relating to reasons for dissatisfaction are not significant.

Attitudes to SOL P (among users)

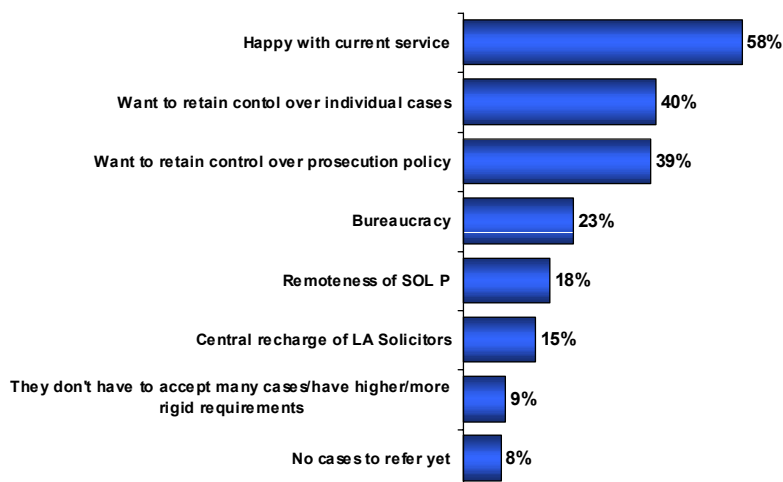


Base: All LAs that have referred cases to SOL P (72)

10.4 Reasons for not Using SOL P

The majority of local authorities do not use SOL P and they were asked to give reasons for not using this service. The reason given by the greatest number of authorities was that they are happy with the current service (58%). Control issues figured strongly also however. Wanting to retain control over prosecution policy was mentioned as a reason for not using SOL P by two in five (39%) and wanting to retain control over individual cases was mentioned at a similar level (40%). A quarter (23%) said that bureaucracy was the reason for not using SOL P and one in five (18%) gave remoteness of SOL P as a reason for not using them. Fifteen per cent mentioned that their reason was that there was a central recharge for local authority solicitors. Fifteen per cent mentioned that their reason was that there was a central recharge for local authority solicitors.

Reasons for not using SOL P



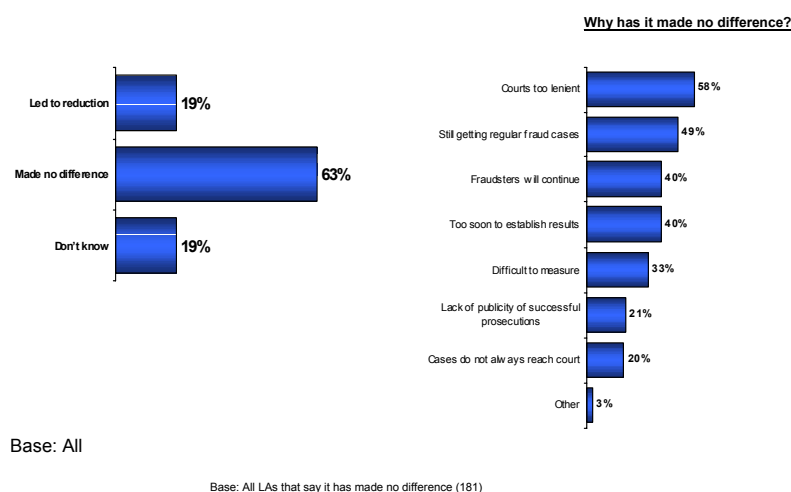
Base: All LA's that have not used SOL P (217)

10.5 Effects of the Threat of Prosecution on the Amount of Fraud

All local authorities in the survey sample were asked if the threat of prosecution has led to a reduction in the amount of fraud encountered in HB/CTB claims. One in five (19%) thought it had led to a reduction in fraud but the majority, 63% in fact, thought the threat made no difference at all. When asked why they thought it made no difference the most frequently mentioned reason, cited by three in five, was that the courts were too lenient (58%). Other reasons included 'still getting regular fraud cases' mentioned by half (49%) of those who said it made no difference and fraudsters will continue until the penalties are used to their fullest extent was mentioned by two in five (40%).

The fifty-four authorities that said they thought that the threat of prosecution had led to a reduction in fraud were asked to explain why. Four in five of this group (83%) said they thought that the publication of successful prosecutions may have had an impact. Seven in ten (70%) of this group said that increased awareness of implications of prosecutions acts as a deterrent and a quarter (26%) said there is no evidence but the threat has stopped claimants from making fraudulent claims.

Effects of the Threat of Prosecution on the Amount of Fraud in HB/CTB Claims



11 Programmes Protection Working Party

11.1 Introduction

As part of its drive to tackle fraud and abuse in the benefits system, the government has established a Programme Protection Working Party for HB. This brings together people from DWP and LAs to identify and propose new and effective ways of protecting the integrity of the programme.

11.2 Awareness and Membership of PPWP

Four out of ten local authorities (40%) had heard of the Programme Protection Working Party. It is interesting to note that English Unitary (73%) and English Metropolitan authorities (72%) were significantly more likely to have heard of the PPWP than Welsh (31%) and Scottish (39%) authorities. Also, authorities with high caseloads (63%) were significantly more likely to have heard of it than authorities with medium (33%) or low caseloads (27%). The most common way of hearing about PPWP is via HB Direct (38%); in addition, almost one in four (23%) authorities first heard about it via an HBR Seminar.

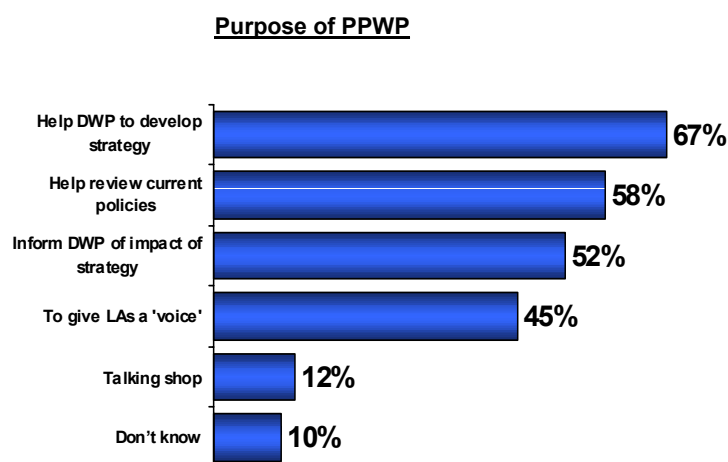
Among the local authorities that have heard of the PPWP, only twelve per cent are members. This leaves almost three out of four authorities (73%) as non members and fifteen per cent who do not know. It is interesting to note that London Borough authorities (36%) are significantly more likely to be members than Welsh (0%), Scottish (0%)¹, English unitary (nine per cent) and English Districts (10%). Authorities with a high caseload were also significantly more likely to be members than those with low caseloads (19% compared to four per cent).

¹ One Scottish authority is a member of PPWP but it was not interviewed on this wave

Among the local authorities that had heard of the PPWP, a majority perceived that the purpose is to help DWP develop its strategy (67%), help review current policies (58%), inform DWP of the impact of their strategy (52%), to give LAs a voice (45%) and talking shop (12%) were also perceptions as can be seen in the Chart below.

Programmes Protection Working Party (PPWP)

- 40% of LAs have heard of PPWP
- Of these, 12% are a member



Base: All LAs that have heard of PPWP (115)

11.3 Attitudes to PPWP

One in two (50%) authorities agreed that PPWP plays an important role in helping formulate policy on fraud and error. It is interesting to note that authorities with high caseloads are significantly more likely to agree with this statement than authorities with medium case loads (62% compared to 32%). English Unitary authorities are also significantly more likely to agree with this statement than Scottish authorities or English districts (69% compared to 22% and 45% respectively).

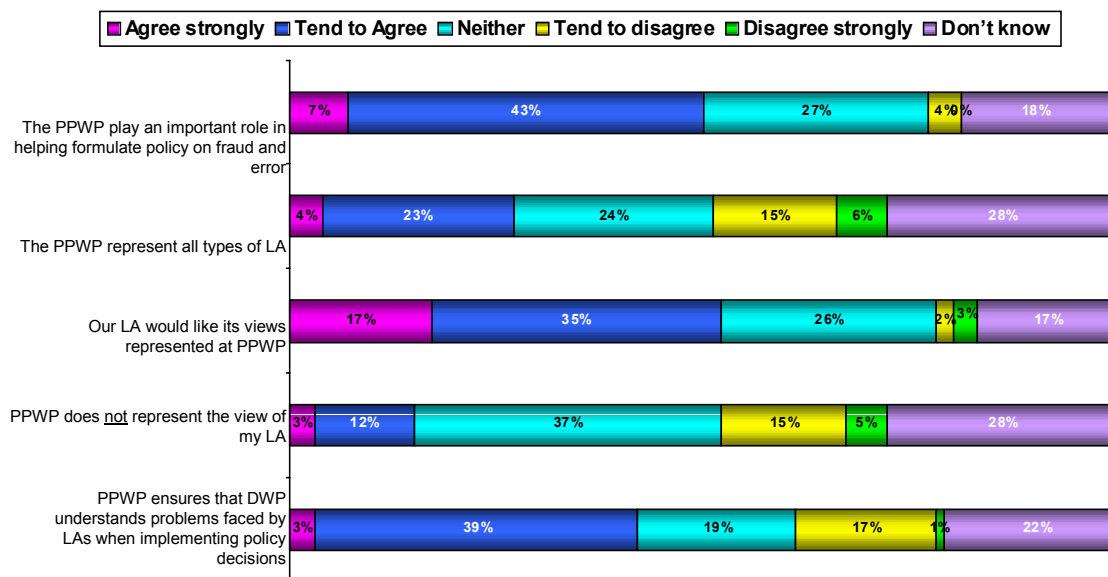
Just over one in four authorities (27%) believed that the PPWP represent all types of local authority. Again, authorities with high caseloads (39%) were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than those with either medium (16%) or low (19%) caseloads.

Just over one in two authorities (52%) would like to have its views represented at PPWP. Again authorities with high caseloads were significantly more likely to agree with this statement compared to those with medium or low caseloads (69% compared to 46% and 27%). English Metropolitan authorities were also significantly more likely to want its views represented compared to English District authorities (67% compared to 39%).

Only 15% of authorities agreed with the statement that the PPWP does not represent the views of their local authority. However, only one in five (20%) authorities disagreed. This leaves 37% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 28% unable to answer the question.

Just over four out of ten authorities (42%) agreed with the statement that the PPWP ensures that DWP understands the problems faced by Local Authorities when implementing policy decisions. English Metropolitan authorities (67%) were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than English Unitary authorities (41%) and English districts (37%). In addition, authorities with high caseloads were significantly more likely to agree than those with medium or low caseloads (52% compared to 32% and 35% respectively).

Attitudes to PPWP



Base: All LAs that have heard of PPWP (115)

11.4 Ways of Being Kept Informed

In terms of the options available for being kept informed about the work of the PPWP, via HB Direct was the most popular (77%). This was followed by HB area of DWP Web site (56%) and minutes of meetings (49%). Only four local authorities would like to be kept informed via email/circular. It is interesting to note that London Boroughs (82%) were significantly more likely to prefer a HB area of the DWP web-site than English Unitary authorities (50%) or English districts (49%).

12 Security BVPI No. 76

12.1 Introduction

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) (known as Statutory Performance Indicators in Scotland and NAW Performance Indicators in Wales) provide essential information on the key services delivered locally. There are a number of HB/CTB performance indicators, one of which - BVPI Number 76 - was introduced in April 2003. It is designed to focus on local authority activity on benefit security. This compares with the previous BVPI which was based on the local authority ticking boxes to confirm activities they were undertaking as part of their written security strategy. Information for the revised BVPI is also required as part of the 2003/2004 MIS stats (form 124A - data items 7 - 10). Therefore, although Scottish authorities are not required to supply this in PI format, the same information is provided as part of the MIS returns (and consequently this section of the survey was completed in terms of the MIS requirements for Scottish authorities).

12.2 Changes Made to Working Practices

A quarter or so (23%) of local authorities have made changes to their working practices since the introduction of the BVPI/MIS changes in April 2003. Those authorities that have made changes to their working practices were asked to specify them. Half (52%) said that they had retrained existing staff, three in ten (30%) said that they had increased the number of home visits undertaken and a quarter (24%) said that they had recruited additional fraud investigators. One in ten (11%) said that they had changed the statistics collected and slightly fewer than that number (9%) said that they had improved administrative procedures.

12.3 Effectiveness in Reducing Fraud

Those local authorities which felt able to comment do not appear to believe in the Security BVPI as an effective tool in reducing fraud or error. When asked how effective they thought the Security BVPI/MIS changes have been in reducing the amount of fraud, just 16% said they thought it was effective. The authorities that felt that the Security BVPI is not effective at reducing fraud were asked to explain why the BVPI is not effective in this way. The response given most frequently, by approximately two thirds (64%) of this group, was that it 'monitors the ability to reduce but doesn't contribute directly'. This is, however, encouraging, as the main purpose of this BVPI is as a measure of LA performance in reducing HB/CTB fraud (and claimant error, see below). Otherwise, two in five (38%) said that it was too early to say and one in five (18%) said that BVPIs are not the

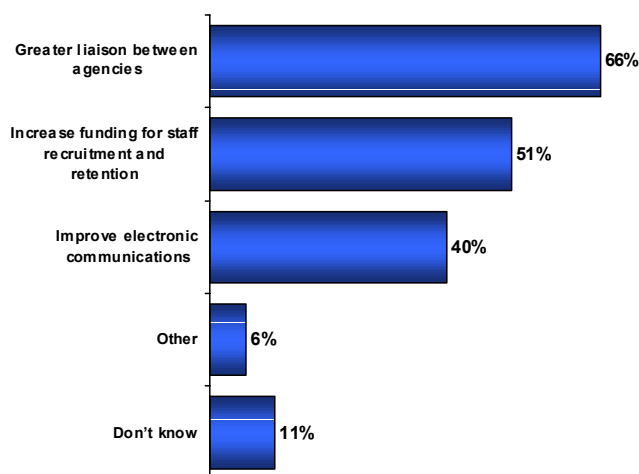
policy driver for their local authority. Other reasons given included ‘too many changes’ and ‘too many agencies deliver various benefits’ (both mentioned by 13% of this group).

When asked to say how effective they thought the BVPI had been in reducing claimant error, a slightly greater number, one in five (18%) said that they thought that it had been effective. Three in five (59%) of the group of authorities that feel that the BVPI/MIS changes have not been effective in reducing the amount of claimant error, said that it is because ‘the BVPI monitors the ability to reduce but doesn’t contribute directly’. This too is encouraging for the reasons given above. Otherwise, two in five (40%) simply said it is too early to say. Other reasons given included ‘BVPIs are not the policy driver for the local authority’ (mentioned by 17%) and ‘too many changes’ mentioned by 13% of this group.

12.4 Alternatives to Security BVPI

The local authorities that thought the Security BVPI was not effective at reducing fraud or error were asked to suggest alternatives that would reduce fraud and error. The response given most frequently, by two thirds (66%) of this group, was greater liaison between agencies. Half (51%) thought that a reasonable alternative would be to increase funding for staff recruitment and retention whilst two in five (40%) suggested improved electronic communications in an attempt to reduce fraud and error. These suggestions are helpful in providing means of reducing fraud and claimant error, in contrast to the main purpose of the Security PI as a measure of LA performance in reducing HB/CTB fraud and claimant error.

Alternatives to Security BVPI that would reduce fraud and error



Base: All who feel security BVPI is not effective at reducing fraud or error (161)

13 Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

13.1 Introduction

The BFI was established in 1997. Its mission is to strengthen the administration of benefits through inspection and support. It seeks to achieve this through the following aims:

- report to the Secretary of State on the standards of benefit administration and security
- identify risks and make recommendations for improvements in benefit administration and security
- identify and promote good practices across the organisations involved in delivering benefits
- provide advice, based on inspection findings, to those developing benefit policies, strategies and operational delivery.

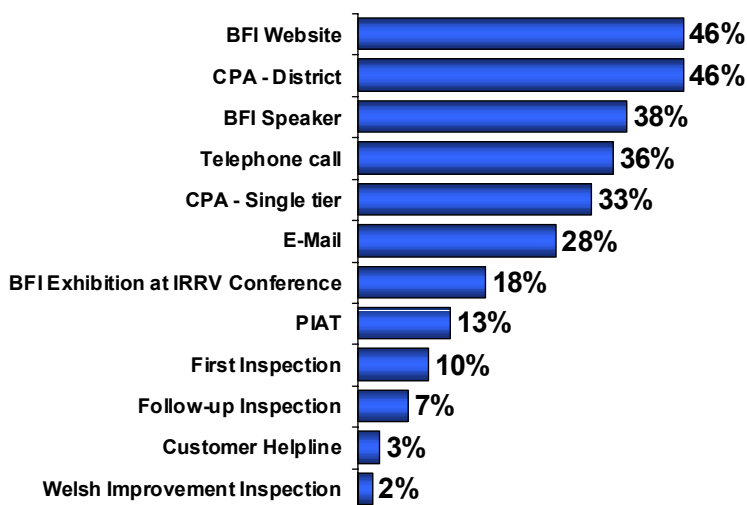
13.2 Contact with BFI

Around three-quarters (76%) of local authorities participating in the survey have had contact with the BFI. It is interesting to note that English Unitary authorities (97%), English Metropolitan (100%) and London Boroughs (95%) are all significantly more likely to have had contact than Welsh (62%), Scottish (35%) or English Districts (73%). This is to be expected because of the CPA programme that started with English single tier authorities in 2002. All single tier authorities in England have now experienced subsequent improvement reporting. The programme for English Districts is now underway and will be finished later this year. Separate programmes are in operation for Wales and Scotland with different timescales. Local authorities with high caseloads (96%) were significantly more likely to have had contact with the BFI than those authorities with medium (67%) or low (69%) caseloads and this is likely to be due to previous BFI work programmes that have concentrated on the highest spending authorities.

There are a large number of ways in which local authorities could have had contact with the BFI; these methods can be seen in the Chart below. The overall most common type of contact was Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) – District (46%) or Single Tier (33%), although 46% also mentioned the BFI web site, 38% had seen a BFI speaker at a seminar or event, 36% have had telephone contact with BFI staff and 28% have had e-mail contact.

Type of contact with BFI since April 2002

75% of LAs have had contact

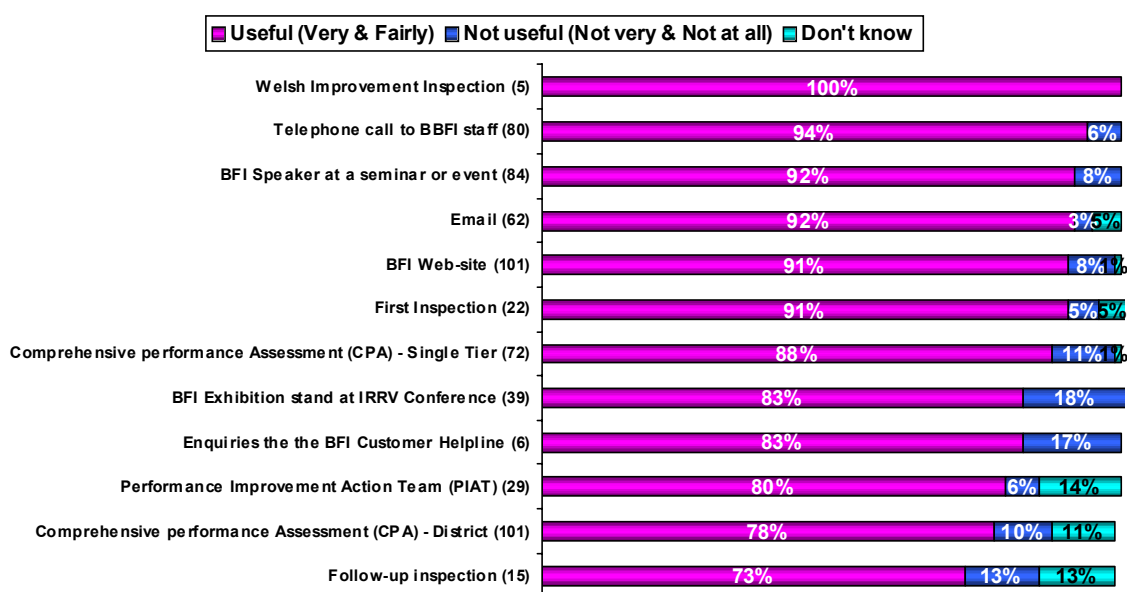


Base: All

13.3 Usefulness of Final Report/Outcome of Contact

Ratings of usefulness for different methods of contact with the BFI were generally very high. Overall, the Welsh improvement inspection was rated the most useful, with all participating Welsh authorities rating it as either very useful (40%) or fairly useful (60%). At a national level, telephone calls to BFI staff were rated the most useful, with 43% of authorities rating it as very useful and a further 51% as fairly useful, representing a high majority of 94% finding telephone contact useful at some level. The least useful method was the Follow-Up Inspection, but even this received relatively high ratings with one in five (20%) of authorities rating it as very useful and 53% as fairly useful. The ratings for other methods of contact can be seen in the chart below.

Usefulness of BFI Contact



Base: All who had contact with each part of the BFI

13.4 Professionalism of Staff

General levels of staff professionalism were perceived as being very high for all types of contact, as can be seen in the Chart below. Special notice should be taken of the rating for staff at the BFI Exhibition stand at the IRRV Conference. All 39 authorities that had contact with these members of staff rated them as professional (59% very professional and 41% as fairly professional). Even for the lowest rating of staff professionalism, 8-% of authorities rated staff as professional (33% very professional and 47% fairly professional).

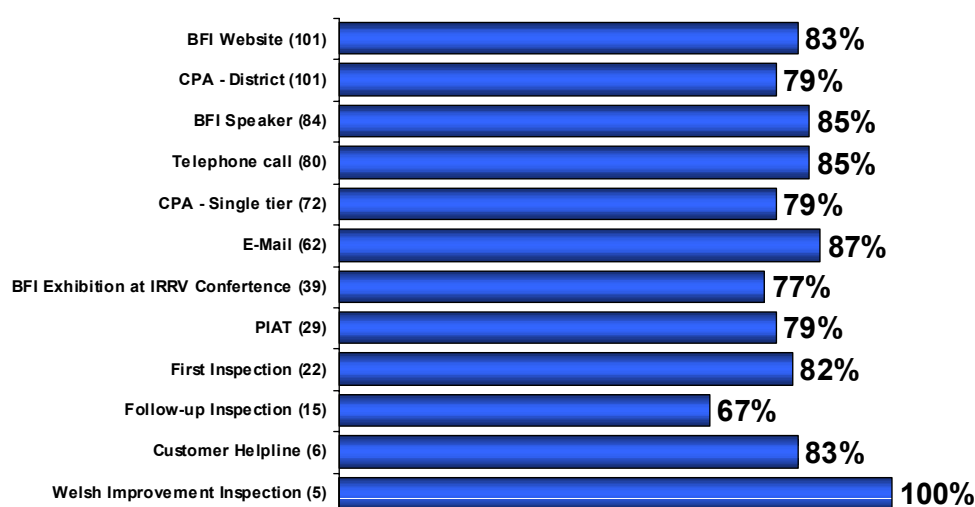
Table 10: How professional are the staff

	Bases	Very/fairly professional %	Not very/at all professional %	Don't know %
Welsh Improvement Inspection	5	100		
BFI Exhibition stand at IRRV Conference	39	100		
Enquiries to the BFI Customer Helpline	6	100		
BFI Speaker at a seminar or event	84	97	2	
Comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) Single tier	72	97	3	
Telephone call to BFI Staff	80	96	3	3
First Inspection	22	95	5	
Email	62	90	2	8
Comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) District	101	89	2	9
BFI Web-site	101	88	1	12
Performance Improvement Action Team (PIAT)	29	82	3	14
Follow up inspection	15	80	13	7

13.5 Overall Satisfaction with Service.

Overall satisfaction with various aspects of the BFI service was very high. As can be seen in the Chart below, satisfaction was highest for e-mail, for which 87% of authorities showed some level of satisfaction (45% were very satisfied and 42% were fairly satisfied). The lowest level of satisfaction was for the Follow-up Inspection (66%). For this method of contact, two authorities were very satisfied and eight were fairly satisfied of the fifteen authorities that had experienced a Follow-up inspection.

Satisfaction with service received : all satisfied



Base: All

Those authorities that were only fairly satisfied or actually expressed dissatisfaction with particular types of contact, were asked the reason why. The Table below details the findings for those forms of contact where 30 or more authorities gave an answer. The answers for the forms of contacts mentioned by fewer than 30 authorities (ranging from just two to twenty-three authorities) are shown in the computer tables.

The main reason for some respondents saying that they were not very satisfied with the CPA, both single tier and district, is that more time is needed to gather information (44% and 43% respectively). Inspection/assessment could be scheduled to avoid LA peaks, more information available on good practices and more time to comment on draft report, were all common reasons for comment from this group.

More information needing to be available was the reason given for over one in four (22%) authorities for not being very satisfied with BFI Speakers. Staff needing to be friendlier was the reason given by those respondents that said they were not very satisfied with telephone calls to the BFI (12%). One in ten authorities (10%) thought the e-mail service should be faster and 41% who have had contact via the web site thought that more information should be available on good practices.

Table 11: Reasons for not being very satisfied with Different Forms of Contact

	CPA Single Tier (Base: 52) %	CPA – District (Base:51) %	BFI Speaker (Base:54) %	Phone call to BFI Staff (Base:42) %	Email (Base:30) %	Website (Base:61) %
More time to gather information	44	43	4	2	3	3
Inspection could be scheduled to avoid LA peaks	35	22	-	2	3	2
More information available on good practice	29	27	22	10	3	41
More time to comment on draft report	25	29	2	5	7	2
More co-operation between inspectorates	21	18	13	7	7	10
More notice of inspection	21	18	2	5	3	2
More feedback on how customer feedback has been used	10	10	6	7	7	11
Pre-inspection information was difficult to collect/cd/forms hard to use	6	-	-	-	-	2
Inspectorate was too brief	4	-	-	-	-	-
No recognition of the practicalities of running the service in the real world/in local conditions	4	2	-	-	-	-
Inspection was too brief/dull and uninformative	4	6	2	-	-	-
Service should be faster	4	2	4	7	10	2
Haven't been inspected yet	4		2	5	7	2
Dissatisfied with inspection	2	-	-	-	-	-
Disagreed with inspectorates findings	2	6	-	-	-	-
Staff could be more helpful	2	4	-	12	7	-
Dissatisfied with inspection methodology	2	6	-	2	3	-
Web site is not user friendly	-	-	-	-	-	10
Web site could be better	-	-	-	-	-	5
Base	52	51	54	42	30	61

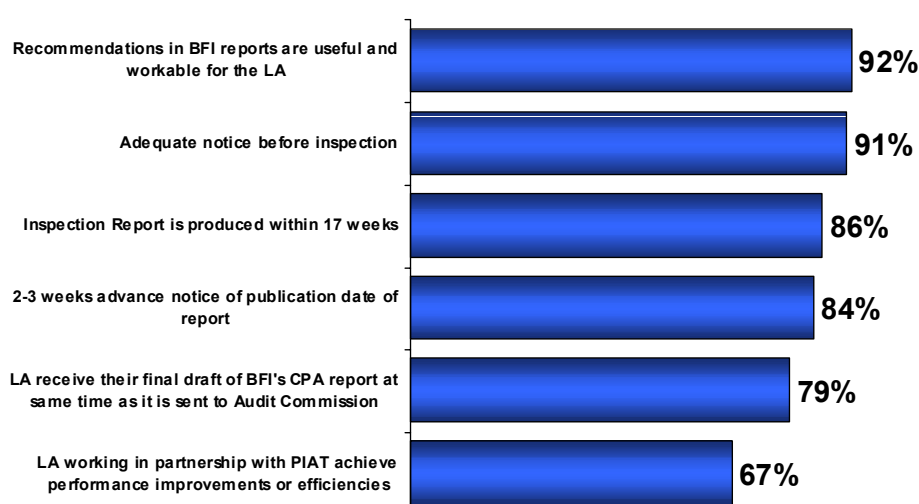
13.6 Importance of Various Aspects of BFI's Service

As can be seen in the Chart below, the most important aspect of the BFI's service is that recommendations in BFI reports are useful and workable for the local authority concerned. Over nine out of ten authorities (92%) rated this as important (86% very important and six per cent fairly important). Interestingly, authorities with high caseloads were significantly more likely to find this aspect important compared to authorities with medium caseloads (97% compared to 86%).

Eighty-three per cent of authorities rated receiving their final draft of the BFI's CPA report at the same time as it is sent to the Audit Commission, as important. It is interesting to note that English Unitary authorities (93%) and English Metropolitan authorities (92%) were significantly more likely to rate this aspect as important than Welsh (69%) and Scottish (70%) authorities, London Boroughs (73%) or English Districts (84%).

From these survey results it would appear that the least important aspect of the BFI's service is local authorities working in partnership with the PIAT to achieve performance improvements or efficiencies. It is worth reflecting however that this service is a relatively new one, which may have influenced their perception and despite the newness of the service, two out of three authorities (67%) rated it as important (39% very important and 28% fairly important). Interestingly, Welsh authorities are significantly more likely to rate this aspect as more important than Scottish authorities (85% compared to 56%).

Importance of Aspects of BFI Service



Base: All

14 Appeals Service

14.1 Introduction

HB and CTB claimants may appeal against the decisions made by LAs. LAs refer appeals to the Appeals Service. The Appeals Service is responsible for the administration of appeals. It was established as an executive agency of the DWP in April 2000, although it did not take HB/CTB referrals until July 2001. Its Chief Executive is accountable to Parliament for performance. The actual hearing of appeals – as opposed to the administration – remains independent of the Department. The President of appeals and panel members are appointed by the Lord Chancellor.

Since July 2001, Omnibus Surveys have aimed to find out how effectively the new system is working in practice and the effect on the processing of appeals.

14.2 Customer Satisfaction Surveys Relating to Appeals

Just six per cent of authorities have conducted a customer survey specifically asking about claimants experiences of the Appeals process. Among these sixteen authorities, thirteen had undertaken the survey in 2003 and eleven included a question asking about overall satisfaction with the way the appeal was handled. Among these eleven authorities, nine of them said that “satisfied” best describes their claimants views of the way the appeal was handled (two very satisfied and seven fairly satisfied).

14.3 Number of Complaints Received in Last Year

Half of authorities have a formal complaints procedure for HB/CTB appeals (48%) and half do not (50%). English Unitary authorities and English Metropolitan authorities are most likely to have a formal complaints procedure (63% and 64% respectively).

However, among those authorities that do not have a formal complaints procedure, 26% record details of complaints received from claimants about HB/CTB appeals. On the other hand, 27% do not even do this and 46% said that they do not receive any complaints (ranging from 21% of London Boroughs to 56% of English Districts).

Authorities that either have a formal complaints procedure or record details of complaints received in some other format, were asked how many complaints they have received over the 12 month

period ending September 2003 relating to HB/CTB appeals. Over two-thirds of these authorities (69%) were unable to give an actual figure, but among those that did, the average number of formal complaints over this period across all local authorities is 10. This ranges from an average of three in English Districts to 29 in English Unitary authorities.

14.4 Target Length of Time for Responding to Complaints

Sixty-four per cent of local authorities have a target length of time it should take to respond to complaints about HB/CTB appeals. This increases to 80% of English Unitary authorities and decreases to 52% of Scottish authorities.

Those local authorities that have a target were asked what it is and the answers are shown in the table below:

Table 12: Target Length of Time

	%
Less than a week	15
1 week to less than 2 weeks	55
2 weeks to less than a month	25
1 month to less than 2 months	3
Other	1
Don't know	1

Base: All LAs with a target length of time to respond to complaints (186)

When authorities were asked what percentage of complaints were cleared within the target time over the 12 month period ending September 2003, nearly half (48%) were unable to give an answer. However, half did provide an answer as follows: two per cent said 1-50%, two per cent said 51-75%, six per cent said 76-99 per cent and 42% said 100% (ranging from 20% of London Boroughs to 50% of English Metropolitan Districts and 47% of English Districts).

14.5 Information Provided to Customers about the Appeals Process

Almost all authorities (96%) provide information to customers about the appeals process for HB/CTB appeals. In most cases, this is in the form of a decision notice (84%) or leaflets (77%). In addition, 40% of authorities that provide information, do so on their website.

Local authorities not only provide information directly about the appeals process but also provide it at the places in the table below. When looking at these findings, it is important to bear in mind that 41% of respondents did not give an answer.

Table 13: Places where information about the appeals process is available

	%
Citizens' advice bureau	24
Job Centre Plus	18
Library	16
Other outreach/satellite/cash office	8
Housing associations	5
Welfare rights unit	4
Local/independent voluntary advice agencies	3
One stop/customer information	3
Housing aid	3
Age Concern	1
Other	6
Don't know	41

Base: All LAs that provide information about the appeals process (276)

Appendix A - The Survey

Methodology

In contrast to previous Waves of the LA Omnibus Survey, respondents were given a choice of completing the questionnaire on the telephone, as a self-completion questionnaire on paper, or as a self-completion questionnaire on the internet.

Sample

Using the updated contacts database from Wave 8, the local authority manager with responsibility for the most areas (out of Rent Rebate, Rent Allowance, Council Tax Benefit, Overpayment Recovery and Benefit Fraud) was identified. This manager then became our contact for Wave 9.

This manager was sent a letter on DWP headed paper which set out the aims of the survey, explained the nature of the input required and advised the recipient that they now have a choice of how to complete the questionnaire. The letter was signed by a DWP signatory and included contact names at both NOP and DWP for queries, or if the respondent wanted to opt out of the survey.

The advance letter included details of each methodology – telephone interview, web-based questionnaire and paper questionnaire. For the web-based questionnaire we provided a URL, allowing respondents to link directly to the survey and each respondent was assigned a user id/password, which had to be entered at the start of the survey. This enabled NOP to keep track of interviews and ensure no one completed a survey more than once. Including an ID also allowed respondents to stop and restart an interview at any point and meant that different managers could easily access and complete the sections relevant to them.

Respondents were also sent a copy of the questionnaire so that they could either, use it to prepare their answers before the telephone interview or use it to fill-in their answers and return it to NOP in the reply-paid envelope provided. It emphasised that, if necessary, they should consult other managers and staff for their input into the questionnaire. Telephone interviewers were instructed to check that the respondent had completed the questionnaire sent in advance and that it was readily available for reference during the interview.

A copy of the questionnaire and advance letter is shown in Appendix B.

Questionnaire Design

Both Department officials and local authority managers were consulted about the content of the questionnaire in order to gain as much useful information as possible from the research.

The first stage of questionnaire development involved a meeting between NOP, OPM and relevant officials within the Department to discuss current issues and policy initiatives and establish the question areas that they would like to be included in the questionnaire.

Once the questionnaire had been through several drafts, face-to-face meetings were set up with five local authority managers in order to test the understanding and comprehension of the questions, as well as give managers an opportunity to raise any issues that are particularly important and relevant to them at the time. These meetings were structured around the draft questionnaire but the structure of the session was kept fluid enough to allow managers to raise new issues and enlarge on existing subjects as they wished.

Once the comments of these managers had been assimilated, the questionnaire was then piloted to test the wording and coverage of the draft document as well as the length of the questionnaire (12-19 September 2003). The questionnaire was set up on the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system and tested on a total of 12 local authority managers. At this stage, the questionnaire was piloted only with respondents on the telephone and not on the web and self-completion.

As for the main stage of fieldwork, each pilot respondent was sent an advance letter and questionnaire. The NOP executive team and a representative from DWP briefed a small team of interviewers. The briefing covered the purpose of the survey and explanations of any particular questionnaire points, as well as allowing time for practice on the questionnaire by means of dummy interviewing. A debrief was held at the end of the pilot interviewing which involved interviewers talking through their experiences in carrying out the pilot work and highlighting any areas of confusion or ambiguity they had observed.

Fieldwork

As for the pilot, all interviewers working on the main stage of interviewing attended a half-day briefing. This covered both general interviewing skills and survey-specific instructions. The briefing was attended by a representative from the Department. Interviewers were also issued with full

interviewer instructions, which included all survey materials including a hard copy of the questionnaire and the advance letter.

Interviewers' task was to phone each local authority and ask respondents how they intended completing the questionnaire. Respondents choosing to undertake the survey on the telephone were then either interviewed or an appointment for another more convenient time was set-up. Those selecting to complete the questionnaire on paper or on the web were asked to complete it as soon as possible (by 28 November at the latest) and, in the case of the paper questionnaire, return it to NOP in the reply-paid envelope provided. Interviewers were then instructed to "telephone chase" those respondents who did not return their completed questionnaire within the following 10 days or so and ask them to complete it as soon as possible.

All telephone interviewing was conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) at NOP's Wimbledon Telephone Interviewing Centre. Given the fact that this was a census of all local authorities and that housing benefit managers are difficult to get hold of due to workload and turnover of staff, interviewers were not given a maximum number of callbacks. Instead, in order to maximise the response rate across the country as a whole, they were asked to adopt a flexible approach in terms of callbacks and to liaise closely with head office throughout the fieldwork period.

The web-based questionnaire was developed by our specialist Web department within NOP. It was written in mrlInterview, software supplied by SPSS and hosted on the NOP World facility. Both the web and paper questionnaires were designed to be professional looking and straightforward to complete.

Interviewers were required to provide weekly progress figures that were used to identify response difficulties during fieldwork. Unobtainable numbers, no answers, wrong numbers etc were all investigated immediately and, during the third week of fieldwork, an e-mail was sent to all "soft" appointments to try and encourage them to participate.

As a result, we achieved interviews with a total of 289 local authority managers, representing a response rate of 71%. This breaks down as: 126 telephone interviews, 106 paper questionnaires and 57 web-based questionnaires. Further details of response rate are shown in table A2.

Interpretation of the Data

Data used for the analysis is derived from three sources: the Contacts Database, DWP and the interview itself. The data was analysed by a number of different variables as shown below:

Local Authority Type	Welsh, Scottish, English Unitary, English Metropolitan, English District, London Borough
Verification Status	Fully compliant, Working to/partially (this category combines “VF LA/not yet compliant” and “Partially compliant”), Non-compliant
Contracting-out Status	Contracted out, Not contracted out
Housing/Council Tax Benefit Caseload	Low, Medium, High
Region	Scotland, North East, Yorkshire and Humberside, North West, East Midlands, West Midlands, East, South East, South West, London, Wales

Information on Local Authority Type, Verification Status, Housing/Council Tax Benefit Caseload and Region was provided as part of the Contacts Database, while Contracting-out Status was asked as part of the interview.

The following points should be noted when using this report:

- a sample, not the entire “population” of local authority housing benefit managers has been interviewed. In consequence, all results are subject to sampling tolerances, which means that not all differences are statistically significant. Where bases are low, care should be taken when interpreting the data
- where percentages do not add up to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” or “other” categories, or multiple answers
- throughout the report, an asterisk indicates a value of less than 0.5% but not zero, and “0” denotes no observation in that cell.

Statistical Reliability

It should be remembered that a sample, not the entire population, of housing benefit managers was interviewed. We cannot therefore be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have if everybody had been interviewed (the “true” values). We can however, predict the variation between the sample results and the “true” values from knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95% - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the true value will fall within a specified range.

However, given that this sample comprises 71% of the total population, the level of statistical reliability is slightly higher than if the sample had come from a larger population. On this basis, responses to the questionnaire provide data with a maximum sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95 per cent level. In practice this means that where 50% give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the “true” value will fall within the range of plus or minus 3.1% from the sample result. The table below shows the sampling error for the whole sample and key sub-groups across a range of parameters.

Table A1: Sampling error

	Sample Size	10% or 90% ±	30% or 70% ±	50% ±
All respondents	289	1.9	2.9	3.1
Local Authority Type:				
Welsh	13	10.4	15.9	17.4
Scottish	23	6.5	9.9	10.8
English Unitary	30	6.6	10	11
English Metropolitan	25	6.5	9.9	10.8
English District	176	2.2	3.4	3.7
London Borough	22	7.2	11.1	12.1

Response Rates

As mentioned earlier a total of 286 interviews were conducted with local authority managers, which represents a response rate of 71%. However, as the table below shows, response rate varies by local authority type, from 74% for English Districts to just 59% for Welsh authorities.

Table A2: Response rates by local authority type

	Total	Local Authority Type					
		Welsh	Scottish	English Unitary	English Metrop'	English District	London Borough
Telephone completes	126	6	14	12	8	77	9
Web-based completes	57	3	4	9	10	27	4
Paper completes	106	4	5	9	7	72	9
TOTAL COMPLETES	289	13	23	30	25	176	22
Refusals	86	8	6	10	9	47	6
Lost in post	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
"Soft" appointment	26	1	3	6	2	10	4
No answer	6	-	-	1	-	4	1
Total sample	408	22	32	48	36	237	33
Response Rate	71%	59%	72%	63%	69%	74%	67%

Sample Profile

Table A3: Sample profile

	Number	%
Total	289	100
Local Authority Type:		
Welsh	13	4
Scottish	23	8
English Unitary	30	10
English Metropolitan	25	9
English District	176	61
London Borough	22	8
Verification Status:		
Fully compliant	213	74
Working to/partially	25	9
Non-complaint	51	18
Contracting Out Status:		
Contracted out	16	6
Not contracted out	273	94
HB/CTB Caseload:		
Low	95	33
Medium	112	39
High	82	28
Decentralisation Status:		
Centralised	271	94
Decentralised	17	6

	Number	%
Region:		
Scotland	23	8
North East	15	5
Yorkshire & Humberside	16	6
North West	31	11
East Midlands	32	11
West Midlands	29	10
East	35	12
South East	42	15
South West	31	11
London	22	8
Wales	13	4

Appendix B – The Questionnaire

Appendix C - The Covering Letter