

Local Authority Omnibus Survey Wave 10

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The Local Authority Omnibus Survey is conducted every six months among managers with responsibility for the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. It aims to provide the Department with a regular means of finding out how local authorities organise their benefit administration and view current and future policy and regulations.

This summary presents the findings of key sections of Wave 10 of the Survey. It also outlines how some of the information collected from this and previous waves has been used. More detailed findings from these and other sections are given in the full report, which is available free of charge.

Wave 10 of the Survey covers questions on the following issues:

- Performance Standards.
- CTB take-up campaign.
- Banking and revised claim forms.
- Monthly data matching and risk based reviews.
- Overpayment Guide.
- Extended access to DWP data for Local Authorities.
- BFI and BFI web site.

Performance Standards

Eighty seven per cent of authorities use the Performance Standards to inform their improvement plans, while around three-quarters use them to monitor performance (74 per cent) and make staff much more aware of what they are trying to achieve (70 per cent).

Around nine in ten or more local authorities have done a **full** assessment on each of the seven Performance Standards modules. They were very positive about the modules in terms of their usefulness, with around nine in ten describing each module as useful.

In two out of five authorities (43 per cent), just one person has responsibility for undertaking self-assessment against the Performance Standards. However, in a half (52 per cent) different people have responsibility for individual/some modules.

A majority of authorities described the balance between Standards relating to outcomes and the Standards relating to Processes as about right. Those that did not give a positive response were more likely to say that there are too many processes rather than too many outcomes.

Four in five or more authorities said that Part 1 sets out the criteria to be achieved for each standard very or fairly clearly. Large majorities of authorities (around nine in ten) described the self-assessment questions for each module as clear.

Opinion is, however, more divided on whether the number of questions is about right or not, in particular for Strategic Management (65 per cent said there are too many questions).

Opinion is very divided on the question of whether or not the current scoring system for measuring the results of self-assessment is about right or whether more weight should be given to other factors. Around a third mention each of the three options – current system is about right, more weight should be given to outcomes rather than processes and more weight should be given to BV/Statutory PIs.

Three-quarters of authorities (77 per cent) have used the Form Flow Self-Assessment Tool.

The main technical difficulties mentioned are as follows: slow response times when using it on a PC (55 per cent) and the process for migrating data to the updated version is too laborious (45 per cent).

Authorities were asked which reporting regime would best suit their needs in monitoring performance. Firstly in terms of key elements, around a third said that they would prefer quarterly (36 per cent) and annually (35 per cent), while 28 per cent would prefer six monthly. Secondly, in terms of completing a full self-assessment, authorities were very clearly in favour of doing it annually as a one off exercise (61 per cent).

When given the choice, three in five (61 per cent) chose to place the self-assessment questions next to the definition of each standard and 23 per cent preferred to retain the current two-part format.

Authorities were very enthusiastic about the introduction of the Performance Standards in an electronic format (80 per cent welcomed the idea).

Council Tax Benefit take-up campaign

Ninety-five per cent of authorities claimed to have received the letter sent out in February 2004 about the DWP campaign to increase the take-up of Council Tax Benefit.

Although, over half of authorities (57 per cent) said that they used neither the electronic flyer nor the headline graphic, 15 per cent used both, one in five (20 per cent) used just the electronic flyer and six per cent used just the headline graphic.

The CTB posters, flyers and leaflet GL17 'Help with your Council Tax' that were sent to authorities were mostly put in local authority offices (mentioned by more than four in five in each case). This was followed by libraries and voluntary organisation outlets.

Attitudes towards the posters and flyers used in the DWP campaign were divided. In each case, over a third described them as good and nearly two in five said that they were neither good nor poor, while a fifth described them as poor.

A majority of 59 per cent described the Best Practice Guide on Council Tax Benefit Take-up as useful. On the other hand, nearly three in ten said that it is not very (25 per cent) or not at all useful (five per cent).

In terms of initiatives that overlap with, or were as a result of, the DWP campaign, around half have provided information on their own web site (50 per cent), devised their own promotional literature (47 per cent) or advertised in the local press (46 per cent). Fifty-eight per cent of authorities targeted these initiatives at all groups but over half singled out pensioners (53 per cent) and one in five (19 per cent) mentioned working age people.

A majority believe that all of the initiatives (the DWP campaign and their authority's own take-up initiatives) have increased the number of enquiries (a lot 13 per cent and a little 51 per cent). A half of this group of authorities said that they both played an equal part, while three in ten felt that their own initiatives were most effective and six per cent said that the DWP campaign was most effective.

Approximately two thirds of all authorities said that, taking each of the various take-up initiatives into account, their caseload has increased (58 per cent a little and six per cent a lot). Just over a quarter (27 per cent) claimed that the various initiatives had made no difference to their caseload.

In order to manage any extra workload, the most frequently mentioned strategies were increased visiting capacity (30 per cent), applying for funding from the Performance Standards Fund (20 per cent) and buying in additional processing capacity (20 per cent).

Authorities perceived the reasons for low take up of Council Tax Benefit amongst pensioners to be the stigma associated with claiming benefits (mentioned by 84 per cent), fear of bureaucracy (66 per cent), the length of the claim form (62 per cent) and the documentation required (61 per cent).

Authorities that are below standard at the Customer Service module of the Performance Standards dealing with 'Encouraging benefit take-up, reducing poverty' are planning the following in order to move to 'At standard': inform council tax payers of CTB with their council tax bill (59 per cent), display posters/leaflets at key

public access points (59 per cent) and co-operate with local Pension Service staff on national campaigns to promote take-up of non-HB/CTB benefits, such as Pension Credit (57 per cent).

Banking and revised claim forms

More than two in five authorities (44 per cent) said that they do not pay housing benefit directly into the bank accounts of landlords or tenants. However, 42 per cent pay directly into the bank accounts of both, 12 per cent pay directly into landlords' accounts only and one per cent pay directly into tenants accounts only.

The average proportion of tenants receiving Housing Benefit that have a bank account was 77.6 per cent (however, 62 per cent of authorities could not answer the question).

Among authorities that pay Housing benefit directly into the bank accounts of either tenants or landlords, the average proportion of **all** tenants (including RSL tenants) receiving Housing Benefit via a bank account was 52.8 per cent (however, 41 per cent could not answer the question).

When asked about the proportion of private sector tenants who receive Housing Benefit via a bank account, again, a substantial proportion of respondents (44 per cent) could not answer. Amongst those giving a proportion, the average was 54.7 per cent.

The main reasons why authorities think that tenants might be reluctant to have their Housing Benefit paid into their bank account are as follows: tenants have never had a bank account (57 per cent), tenants might be worried about getting into debt (32 per cent) and they have a County Court judgement against them (27 per cent).

In addition, authorities believe that the following main barriers exist which prevent the payment of Housing Benefit into tenants' bank accounts: the banks' position/stance (32 per cent), software and security issues (27 per cent and 30 per cent respectively) and clients not having appropriate ID (21 per cent).

Just over a third of authorities (36 per cent) said that they are currently active in promoting payment via tenants' bank accounts.

Three quarters of authorities in the survey either operated a Deposit scheme (45 per cent) or

were aware of such a scheme even if their LA does not operate it (29 per cent).

Monthly data matching and risk based reviews

Most local authorities (94 per cent) have done monthly matching and three quarters (75 per cent) have done risk based reviews since April 2004.

Around three-quarters (78 per cent) of authorities have set-up a referral management system. Of the 49 LAs that have not done this yet, more than half (53 per cent) expect to have done so by October 2004.

In terms of the management information produced on reviews since the changes came into effect in April 2004, a third of authorities (33 per cent) have used the Excel spreadsheet, a quarter (26 per cent) have returned the new HBSD/IAD data extract and around one in ten (11 per cent) has sent in reports from their own system or provided the 2004/5 VF MI (nine per cent).

Attitudes towards the software solution supplied to their authority to implement monthly data-matching and reviews were divided. Around a third (32 per cent) were satisfied but a similar proportion (33 per cent) were dissatisfied. However, satisfaction with the software solution to implement SAFE was higher (44 per cent satisfied); just a quarter (25 per cent) were dissatisfied.

Monthly data matching

Around two thirds (61 per cent) think monthly data matching is working either very or fairly well in terms of detecting fraud and error (29 per cent think it is too soon to tell).

When asked about problems with monthly data matching, over half (55 per cent) had no problems to report whatsoever. On the other hand, the main problems highlighted were poor quality referrals (15 per cent) and problems with the quality of the data they were able to provide (13 per cent). One in five of the authorities with problems said that they have not resolved them yet.

Over half of authorities (53 per cent) said they have had about the same amount of data matches

as anticipated (24 per cent have had more and 19 per cent have had less). Three-quarters of those that have had more than expected said they are managing the increased workload well, while 21 per cent are not doing very/at all well.

Overall the average number of referrals actioned since April 2004 is 121 (32 per cent could not answer the question). When asked how many overpayments have been detected as a result of referrals, the average is 28.5 (however, 52 per cent could not answer the question).

Seventeen per cent of authorities said that since April 2004 they have got more from data matching, eight per cent have got less and 27 per cent said that it was about the same (48 per cent did not know).

The authorities that said that they had actioned one or more data matching referrals said that on average they have started 32.5 fraud investigations as a result of matching referrals (28 per cent did not know).

Before the changes in April, 89 per cent of authorities said that the fraud manager had been responsible for data matching (14 per cent mentioned the benefit manager). However, since April, 38 per cent of authorities said responsibility had changed - in two-thirds of cases (64 per cent), the benefit manager is now taking responsibility, while a quarter (24 per cent) mentioned the fraud manager, a fifth (21 per cent) mentioned new teams and 18 per cent the Verification Framework team.

In order to accommodate monthly data matching, four in five authorities (79 per cent) have trained staff on the changes required and two in five (41 per cent) have recruited/allocated specific staff to deal with it. Two thirds or so (68 per cent) are making organisational changes to cope with the new regime and 43 per cent are working with software suppliers on the changes required.

Risk based reviews

Over a half of authorities (53 per cent) believe that risk based reviews are working well in their authority (29 per cent say it is too soon to tell).

A majority of 69 per cent of authorities said that they use DWP's risk based review, only four per cent use their own and around a quarter (23 per cent) use both.

Authorities have started on average of 549.5 reviews since April 2004 (around three in ten (28 per cent) could not answer the question).

Looking now at authorities' ability to meet the target to commence review action on at least 2.5 per cent (see circular A38/2003 Appendix) of their caseload per calendar month. More than half (54 per cent) met their target but around a third (35 per cent) did not. The main reasons for not meeting the target were IT problems (specified by 64 per cent).

Authorities made the following key changes to accommodate risk based reviews: training of staff on the changes required (81 per cent), making organisational changes to cope with the new regime (72 per cent), recruited/allocated specific staff to deal with this (50 per cent) and working with software suppliers on making organisational changes to cope with the new regime (49 per cent).

In terms of overall satisfaction with monthly data matching and risk based reviews, half (51 per cent) were satisfied while 14 per cent expressed dissatisfaction. The main reasons for dissatisfaction were that it was hard to manage referrals (34 per cent) and they were not getting results in terms of detection and error (32 per cent).

Overpayment Guide

Most authorities (94 per cent) had received the Guide and of these a majority (64 per cent) said they use it occasionally to look things up/refer to. A fifth (22 per cent) use it regularly and one in eleven (nine per cent) have never used it.

A large majority of 93 per cent said that they found the Guide either very or fairly useful. The main ways in which it was described as useful were that 'all guidance is in one place' (90 per cent), a good level of information (55 per cent), to refer to (48 per cent) and guidance given is clear and concise (47 per cent).

Issuing the Guide as a Word document was mentioned most often by users as a way of improving it (44 per cent), while a third (34 per cent) wanted more practical examples.

Three quarters (74 per cent) of authorities have a separate section(s) within the Benefits department that deals with Overpayments.

Three-quarters of authorities (75 per cent) use other DWP benefits to recover HB/CTB Overpayments, 15 per cent never have and one in ten (10 per cent) said that they don't currently but have in the past.

There was a high level of agreement with the statement 'Overpayments Recovery is an important way of a local authority raising money (67 per cent) and also with 'Overpayments Recovery has a high priority within the Benefits Departments (71 per cent). On the other hand, just 19 per cent of authorities agreed that Overpayments Recovery staff are often pulled off to cover other sections of the Benefits Department at times of sickness/leave.

The main problems with recovering HB/CTB Overpayments appear to be difficulties in tracing customers after they stop receiving benefits, mentioned by more than four in five (83 per cent) and that people can't afford to pay them back, mentioned by seven in ten (70 per cent).

Extended access to DWP data for Local Authorities

Ratings of the additional dialogues for Department Central Index were very positive with nine out of ten authorities (89 per cent) finding them useful. The main reasons for finding the additional dialogues useful were that it speeds up the processing of claims (86 per cent), they are less reliant on the DWP for information (75 per cent) and do not have to contact the customer again (71 per cent).

Authorities rated the additional information on the Remote Access Terminal very positively (50 per cent very useful and 43 per cent fairly useful).

Around three in ten authorities (28 per cent) felt that the information for Pension Credit on the RAT was sufficient for processing claims for HB/CTB, but 66 per cent of authorities said that it is not sufficient.

Less than one in five authorities (18 per cent) have an additional RAT terminal in the Fraud and Overpayment Section. Of these, less than half (45 per cent) said that it had helped them to reduce fraud and overpayment, mostly because they can obtain immediate answers (94 per cent).

Three in five of the authorities that have a RAT terminal believed that it has helped them to

reduce their Fraud and Overpayment workload (60 per cent). This is mainly because it has reduced the amount of contact needed with DWP and there is less correspondence to get information from a third party (79 per cent and 71 per cent respectively).

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Three in five authorities had contact (61 per cent) with the BFI in the last six months. The most common type of contact was via the CPA (74 per cent – 48 per cent district and 26 per cent single tier).

Overall, the authorities that had contact with the various services rated the usefulness of the final report or outcome positively. Almost nine out of ten authorities (88 per cent) rated PIAT as useful, three-quarters (75 per cent) CPA District, and two thirds (67 per cent) for CPA single tier, first inspection and follow-up inspection.

The professionalism ratings of staff for all types of contact were very high – between 79 per cent and 100 per cent.

Overall satisfaction levels were also good for all aspects of the BFI, ranging from 60 per cent to 100 per cent.

Nearly nine in ten authorities rated adequate notice before inspections (89 per cent) and recommendations in the BFI report to be useful and workable for the LA (89 per cent) as important. Around four in five rated the following as important: Inspection Report being produced within 17 weeks (83 per cent), two to three weeks advanced notice of publication date of report (81 per cent) and receiving the first draft of CPA report at same time as its sent to the audit commission (78 per cent). The aspect rated as the least important was the LA working with PIAT to achieve performance improvements or efficiencies (62 per cent).

Four out of five authorities (82 per cent) felt that it was very important that the BFI undertakes inspections on DWP agencies and a further eight per cent felt it was fairly important.

Four in five authorities (80 per cent) carried out some form of joint working with the Counter Fraud Investigation Service.

Of the authorities that had carried out regular joint working, the most frequently mentioned

type was via regular meetings (68 per cent). This was closely followed by sharing information (59 per cent), joint visits/investigations (64 per cent), and by telephone (57 per cent).

Three-quarters of authorities (78 per cent) thought the joint working process with the counter fraud investigation service, in terms of counter fraud work, was effective. The most common suggestion for improvement to the Counter Fraud Investigation Service was to increase staff resources (40 per cent). A third (34 per cent) wanted improved liaison with Counter Fraud Investigation.

Four out of five authorities (80 per cent) felt there had been an improvement in fraud detection as a result of joint-working. Results were slightly less positive for fraud prevention; just over three in five authorities (62 per cent) considered it to have improved.

BFI web site

The majority of respondents have personally visited the BFI web site (90 per cent); this is an increase of five per cent since 2003, which is significant at the 95 per cent level.

Nineteen out of twenty authorities that have used the web site (95 per cent) considered the site to be user friendly.

The majority of authorities (94 per cent) also described the information provided on the web site as useful. This is mainly because of the comprehensive collection of BFI reports (84 per cent).

In terms of improving the web site, authorities made the following key suggestions: more examples of what seems to work (62 per cent), more examples of pro-active measures that the authorities could use (57 per cent) and more examples of specific improvements achieved by LAs (50 per cent).

The most common reasons for visiting the web site were to compare their performance with a similar authority (55 per cent) and to find examples of good practices (52 per cent).

The vast majority of authorities (98 per cent) believe that they will access the BFI web site in the future.

About the survey

One manager from all 408 LAs in England, Scotland and Wales was invited to take part in Wave 10 of the Survey. Each received an advance letter that included a copy of the questionnaire, so that they could, if necessary, consult other managers.

A total of 222 local authorities completed the questionnaire on the web (89), on paper (82) or on the telephone (51), between 14 June and 20 August 2004.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 801 5. Research Report 242. March 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

You can also download this report free from: www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above and from:

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