



RESEARCH

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Best Value Performance Indicators

Planning Applicants Satisfaction Survey

Final Report

Prepared for: **Bury Metropolitan Borough Council**
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Date: December 8th 2003

1. INTRODUCTION.

Beacon Research has been commissioned by Bury Metropolitan Borough Council to undertake a user satisfaction survey as part of the Government's Best Value Initiatives.

This particular document refers to a survey of Planning Applicants, which was undertaken during October / November 2003.

The following document contains our final report on the results from this survey.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES / METHODOLOGY.

The broad objective of the study is to establish benchmark levels of satisfaction, amongst Planning Applicants, with the services they receive from the Council.

The objectives, questionnaire content, method and style of the survey were all undertaken in accordance with the Government guidelines published by the ODPM and entitled '*Best Value Performance Indicators for 2003/2004*'.

It was initially agreed with the Council that a self-completion postal survey of planning applicants be undertaken based upon a sample of 700 respondents.

A file of applicants, for the period April- September 2003 was provided by the Council, which was initially de-duplicated then used as our survey sample. Unfortunately the total number of planning applicants for the appropriate period, after the removal of duplicates, was below this figure and the eventual sample was therefore all 445 applicants

At the same time, the questionnaire and covering letters were agreed with the Council and then printed.

The initial questionnaire and covering letter were packed and dispatched on 17th October 2003. A first reminder letter and further questionnaire was sent to non-respondents on October 31st and a final reminder dispatched on November 12th 2003. At the time of the closing date for replies, a total of 226 completed questionnaires had been received.

Details of the responses at various stages of the survey are as follows:

Initial mailing	107
First reminder	57
Final reminder	<u>62</u>
Total	226 (50.7%)

A full breakdown of the response rate is shown below.

		%
Initial sample	445	100.0
Completed questionnaires	226	50.7
Refusals	3	0.7
Not applicable / someone else dealt with it	9	2.0
No reply	216	48.5

The initial sample used was below target at 445, and the final response rate of 50.7% was just above the 50% we had hoped for. Response rates on the Planning surveys were generally poorer than we expected

The profile of applicants, who actually responded to the survey, shows that 25.2% were aged 55 or more, whilst 16.5% were also aged 34 or less.

Age Profile

	%
18 - 34	16.5
35 - 54	58.3
55+	25.2
 Average Age	 45.9 years

Since many of the applications were from Companies and Agents, it is difficult to tell whether this profile is typical of planning applicants. Over 80% of applicants were male.

4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.

The main results of the survey, may be summarised as follows:-

4.1 About the Application

Under half of applications were as private individuals, whilst a further 38% were applying as Agents acting on behalf of another party.

	%
As a private individual	39.4
As part of your own business	9.3
On behalf of your employer	10.2
As an agent acting on behalf of another party	37.6
Other	0.4

Similarly, 58.4% of applications were for a household, 19% were business and 17% were described as Residential Development.

	%
Householder	58.4
Business or Industry Development	19.0
Residential Development	17.3
Listed building or Conservation area Consent	4.4
Other	9.7

The 'other' category includes a significant number of schools and churches.

Over three quarters of all applicants had applied to Bury Metropolitan Borough Council Planning Division for planning consent previous to their most recent application.

	%
Yes	78.7
No	19.4
DK / Can't remember	1.9

Amongst this group, the vast majority of respondents had made 1-5 applications in the past three years (Probably only 1 or 2 but the question is not very clear).

	In the last 6 months %	In the last year %	In the last 2 years %	In the last 3 years %
1-5	48.2	31.8	22.9	22.4
6-10	5.9	10.6	9.4	9.4
11+	1.2	5.9	14.1	15.1
DK / No reply	44.7	51.8	53.5	52.9

Unfortunately, as one can see from the previous table large numbers of respondents, who should have answered, did not answer this question.

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4.2 Experience with the Planning Department.

Applicants were first asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with different statements regarding their contact with the Planning Department.

The results may be summarised as follows:-

	% Saying Not applicable	% Saying Agree	% Saying Disagree	Mean Score (+5 to +1)
I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application	10.6	73.3	8.5	3.80
The Council kept me informed about the progress of my application	4.9	54.9	23.8	3.34
The Council dealt promptly with my queries	6.6	70.1	14.2	3.63
I understood the reasons for the decision made on my application	7.5	80.4	9.1	3.84
I feel that I was treated fairly and that my view point was listened to	10.2	72.9	12.3	3.73

In general, planning applicants feel that they were treated fairly, given advice and dealt with promptly.

In particular, 80% of applicants agree that they understood the reasons given for any decision regarding their planning application.

If there is a relatively weak area, it is that of keeping applicants informed about the progress of their application. In this survey 55.0% said they were kept informed, but 23.8% disagreed with this statement.

4.3 Overall Satisfaction.

Overall, 78% are satisfied with the service they received from the Council, whilst only 9.1% were dissatisfied.

	%
Very satisfied	32.7
Quite satisfied	43.4
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	12.4
Quite dissatisfied	3.5
Very dissatisfied	5.3
DK/No reply	2.7
Mean Score (1 to 5)	3.97

Predictably, perhaps, successful applicants were more satisfied than unsuccessful applicants.

4.4 Outcome.

Over 87% of applicants said that their application was successful, whilst 10.5% were refused permission/consent.

	All	Age18-34	Age 55+
	%	%	%
Successful	86.8	70.8	90.4
Refused permission/consent	10.5	26.5	5.8
DK/Not had a reply	2.7	2.9	3.8

Older applicants were more likely to be successful than younger applicants.

4.5 Rating of Service

Respondents were asked to say whether various aspects of the Planning service provided by the Council had improved or not, over the past three years.

	Better	Worse	The Same	DK / NA
	%	%	%	%
The advice and help provided to submit my application	20.6	7.8	71.6	54.9
The information provided about the progress of my application	12.0	17.6	70.4	52.2
The promptness with which queries about my application were dealt with	16.8	20.6	62.6	52.7
The clarity of the reasons for the decision given	14.3	10.5	75.2	53.5
The fairness with which my application was dealt with & viewpoint listened to	19.6	8.4	72.0	52.7

In general, more applicants think that the service has got better, rather than worse. However, more applicants perceive that the service has worsened regarding information provided about progress and the promptness with which queries are dealt with.

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4.6 Further Comments.

Applicants were asked, at this stage, if they had anything further they wished to add. Three quarters of all applicants (77%) made no further comment. This is usual in this type of survey.

Amongst those making some form of comment, the most notable issue was delay in making a decision.

	%
No / Nothing / No reply	68.9
No / Nothing / Quite satisfied	8.4
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Delays / Long time in processing application	3.5
Delays / Long time in replying / Acknowledging application	1.3
Application was made difficult by the Council	0.4
Application was made expensive by the Council	0.4
Council provided quick / good service	0.9
Council Officers efficient / Helpful	6.2
Staff problems / job sharing schemes	1.3
Other	14.6

4.7 Sample Profile

Applicants were asked to provide various details about themselves. These are summarised as follows:-

	%
Sex - Male	83.6
- Female	16.4
Average Age	45.9 years
	%
<u>Employment Status</u>	
Employee in Full or Part - Time employment	54.5
Self Employed	32.3
Unemployed	0.9
Permanently sick/disabled	1.3
Wholly retired from work	3.5
Looking after the home	1.3
Full time/Part - time Education/Training	0.4
Something Else	0.4
Refused/No reply	5.3

The average age of all applicants is 45.9 years, with 58.3% aged 35 – 54. Almost a third of all applicants are self-employed.

4.8 Disability

Only 7.2% of applicants (21.3% of those aged 55+), say that they suffer from long - standing illness or disability.

Amongst this group, the vast majority (73.3) say that this illness/disability limits their activities to some degree.

	<u>All</u>	<u>Age 55+</u>
	%	%
Long term illness or disability		
YES	7.2	21.3
NO	92.8	78.7
Limits activity		
YES	73.3	80.0
NO	26.7	20.0

4.9 Ethnicity

The vast majority (92.8%) of applicants described themselves as “White British”, whilst a further 2.4% were of “Other White” descent.

