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Best Value Performance Indicators

Planning Applicants Satisfaction Survey

Final Report

Prepared for: **Bury Metropolitan Borough Council**
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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 September / October 2006.

The following document contains our final report, based upon the findings and analysis of the survey. A full set of survey tabulations can be supplied separately

In addition, the report provides technical details relating to the conduct of the survey, a consideration of response rates and respondent profile, plus a guide to reading tables and interpreting the data.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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, content and style of the survey were in accordance with the Government guidelines published by the Audit Commission entitled "*Best Value Performance Indicators for 2006/2007- Guidance for undertaking the Best Value Surveys*",

Specifically the survey collected the following Best Value Indicator information:

BV111 – Overall satisfaction with planning division, by those making a planning application.

3. METHODOLOGY

The Council decided, having considered the available guidelines that it would undertake a self completion postal survey of planning applicants based upon a sample of 800 respondents.

A file of applicants, for the period April- September 2006 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 well below this figure and the eventual sample was therefore **all** 425 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 22nd September 2006. A first reminder letter and further questionnaire was sent to non-respondents on October 12th and a final reminder dispatched on October 26th 2006. At the time of the writing, a total of 164 completed questionnaires had been received.

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

	<u>Qty</u>	<u>%</u>
Initial mailing	67	
First reminder	50	
Final reminder	<u>47</u>	
Total	164	(38.4%)

A full breakdown of the response rate is shown below.

	Qty	%
Initial sample	425	100.0
Completed questionnaires	163	38.4
Refused	2	0.5
NA/ Someone else dealt with it	1	0.2
No reply	259	60.9

The initial sample used was below target at 425, and the final response rate of 38.4% was below the 50% we had hoped for and below the level achieved in 2003. Response rates on the Planning surveys have generally been poorer than we expected, and below the 2003 levels.

The profile of applicants, who actually responded to the survey, shows that 32% were aged 55 or more, whilst 18.9% were also aged 34 or less.

Age profile	%
18 - 34	18.9
35 – 54	49.3
55+	31.8
Average age	47.1 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

In the following section of the report we summarise the main findings from this survey of planning applicants, beginning with the key indicator.

4.1 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

BV 111 – how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the service provided by the Council in processing your application?

78.5% state they are **very** or **fairly satisfied** with the service provided by the Council whilst 10.4% are dissatisfied

The confidence limit for this question is 6.3.

Therefore we can be 95% confident that **78.5%** ($\pm 6.3\%$) of planning applicants are very / fairly satisfied with the service provided. (The real figure in total population of applicants therefore lies within the 71.8% to 84.8% range.) *Base: 163*

4.2 SUMMARY OF OTHER FINDINGS

The other key findings from this Planning applicants Survey may be summarised as follows

4.2.1 About the Application

Over 37% of applications were as private individuals, whilst a further 46.3% were applying as an agent acting on behalf of another party.

	2006 %	2003 %
As a private individual	37.7	39.4
As part of your own business	8.0	9.3
On behalf of your employer	6.2	10.2
As an agent acting on behalf of another party	46.3	37.6
Other	1.9	0.4

Similarly, 60.9% of applications were for a household, 14.3% were business and 8.1% were described as Residential Development.

	2006 %	2003 %
Householder	60.9	58.4
Business or Industry Development	14.3	19.0
Residential Development	8.1	17.3
Listed Building or other Conservation Area Consent	4.3	4.4
Other	12.4	9.7

The 'other' category includes a number of schools and several changes of use

Over 62% of all applicants had applied to Bury Metro Planning Division for planning consent previous to their most recent application.

	%
Yes	62.3
No	35.8
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).

No. of applications	In the last 6 months %	In the last year %	In the last 2 years %	In the last 3 years %
1-5	83.1	60.9	50.9	43.1
6-10	5.6	21.9	18.2	20.7
11+	7.0	12.5	21.9	25.8

Unfortunately, large numbers of respondents did not answer this question.

4.2.2 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: -

	Not applicable %	Agree %	Disagree %	Mean Score (+5 to +1)	Mean Score 2003
I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly	7.4	67.4	14.0	3.65	3.80
The Council kept me informed about the progress of my application	1.9	60.5	18.5	3.50	3.34
The Council dealt promptly with my queries	2.5	64.3	17.2	3.58	3.63
I understood the reasons for the decision made on my application	2.5	77.7	12.8	3.79	3.84
I felt that I was treated fairly and that my point of view was listened to	3.8	73.4	14.2	3.70	3.73

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

In particular, 77.7% 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 60.5% **agree** that they were kept informed, but 19% **disagreed** with this statement. All features show very little change over 2003, with the exception of "I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly", the results for which are marginally poorer

4.2.3 Overall Satisfaction

Overall, 78.5% are satisfied with the service they received from the Council, whilst only 10.4% were dissatisfied. This a directional but not a significant improvement over 2003

	2006	2003
	%	%
Very satisfied	37.4	33.6
Quite satisfied	41.1	44.5
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	11.0	12.7
Quite dissatisfied	5.5	3.6
Very dissatisfied	4.9	5.5
DK/No reply	-	-
Mean Score (1 to 5)	4.01	3.97

Predictably, perhaps, successful applicants were more likely (86.1%) to be satisfied than unsuccessful applicants (41.6%).

4.2.4 Outcome

Almost 85% of applicants said that their application was successful, whilst 14.9% were refused permission/consent.

	2006	2003
	%	%
Successful	84.5	86.8
Refused permission/consent	14.9	10.5
DK/Not had a reply	0.6	2.7

Younger applicants were more likely to be successful than older applicants.

4.2.5 Special requirements

Exactly 58% of applicants said that their special requirements were met, whilst only 1.2% said that they were not. A further 41% had no special requirements

	%
Yes	58.0
No	1.2
DK / NA	40.7

4.2.6 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 %	The Same %	Worse %	DK / NA %
The advice and help provided to submit my application	21.4	66.7	11.9	23.6
The information provided about the progress of my application	19.5	69.0	11.5	20.2
The promptness with which queries about my application were dealt with	27.9	58.1	14.0	21.8
The clarity of the reasons for the decision given	21.2	69.4	9.4	22.7
The fairness with which my application was dealt with & viewpoint listened to	18.1	65.1	16.9	23.9

In general, significantly more applicants think that the service has got better, rather than worse. This is equally true of all elements. The results are also better across all elements than they were in 2003

4.2.6 Further Comments

Applicants were asked, at this stage, if they had anything further they wished to add. Over 80% made no further comment. This is usual in this type of survey.

Amongst those making some form of comment, there were no notable issues.

	%
No / Nothing / No reply	77.9
No / Nothing / Quite satisfied	2.5
Delays / Long time in processing application / reaching decision	1.2

Delays / Long time in replying / Acknowledging application	0.6
Council provided good/ quick service	0.6
Application was made difficult/ complicated by the Council	0.6
Council Officers efficient / Helpful	0.6
Other	19.6

4.3 **SAMPLE PROFILE**

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

Gender	%
Male	80.9
Female	19.1

Employment Status	%
Employee in Full or Part-Time employment	52.2
Self-Employed	36.9
Unemployed	0.6
Wholly retired from work	7.6
Permanently sick / Disabled	-
Looking after the home	0.6
Full-time/ Part-time Education/ Training	0.6
Doing something else	-
Refused/ No reply	1.3

The average age of all applicants is 47.1 years, with 49.3% aged 35 – 54. Over a third of all applicants are self-employed.

4.3.1 **Disability**

Only 7.3% of applicants (13.3% of those aged 55+), say that they suffer from long - standing illness or disability.

Amongst this group, the majority (54.5%) say that this illness/disability limits their activities to some degree.

	All %	Age 55+ %
<i>Long term illness or disability</i>		
YES	7.3	13.3
NO	92.7	86.7
<i>Limits activity</i>		
YES	54.5	83.3
NO	45.5	16.7

4.3.2 **Ethnicity**

The vast majority (94%) of applicants described themselves as “White British”, whilst a further 2.0% were of “Other White” descent. Amongst the minority ethnic groups 4% were Asian / Asian British and 0.7% Black/ Black British- African.