

# **Beacon Council Scheme Round Five** **Benefits Administration Theme**

## *Evidence on Current Practice, Best Practice and User Satisfaction*

### **Background**

This paper presents key findings on current practice, best practice and user satisfaction in the selected theme. This information has been taken from the Round Five theme reports completed by the central government policy leads in each theme in late Spring 2003. The full theme reports can be found at: [www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/beacon/beacon.htm](http://www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/beacon/beacon.htm)

The user satisfaction data and analysis was completed by MORI in August 2003 and the full report on all themes is available at [www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/beacon5.pdf](http://www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/beacon5.pdf)

The evidence base on theme research and user satisfaction is designed to assist the Independent Advisory Panel in creating the selection criteria for the scheme. It is also designed to assist local authorities in applying for the scheme and in improving services generally. The research evidence base on the Beacon Council Scheme is crucial in identifying current and best practice in service provision whilst taking into account the satisfaction of those that receive the services. This evidence base also enables local authorities to identify areas for improvement as well as potential areas for innovation in attempting to achieve continuous improvement in service provision.

The research evidence base can also demonstrate whether the scheme is achieving its long-term objective of improving services. Warwick University Business School has commenced work on a three to five year ODPM / IDeA funded project entitled *An Impact Evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme* and this will yield further evidence shortly and greatly contribute to the future evidence base on service improvement.

### **Section 1 - Current Practice and Indications of Excellent Practice in Benefits Administration**

#### *Overview*

1. In essence, for Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) administration, excellent practice is that which delivers sustained high performance against key outputs such as speed and accuracy of claims processing and providing relatively high levels of customer satisfaction whilst at the same time safeguarding against fraud. This is typified by good performance against Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs), compliance with legal requirements (such as making decision on claims within 14 days of all information being available) and meeting or exceeding the HB/CTB Performance Standards.
2. Beyond all this there is significant scope for local authorities (LAs) to develop their links and partnerships with local agencies and other organisations to further improve their benefit services, help people meet their housing needs and support those moving into work or between jobs.

3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) efforts to encourage improvements has been outlined earlier in this report. We would expect LAs to be aware of the tools DWP has made available and to have used those relevant to it.

***Trends and future direction***

4. The introduction of the Best Value programme and, more recently Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), has increased many LAs' awareness of the importance of their benefits services and helped promote the principle of year on year improvement.
5. The objectives that underpin the HB reforms should act as further drivers for LAs to improve their benefit services. The reforms programme also increases the need for LAs to be geared up to deal with change. Recent restructuring within DWP and the increasing role for tax credits means that LAs are going through a turbulent period. The creation of JobCentre Plus, The Pensions Service, the Debt Management Service and the Appeals Service, together with new tax credits administered by the Inland Revenue means that there are now several delivery partners that LAs will need to liaise with for the effective delivery of HB and CTB. And there is still a need for LAs to work with other bodies effectively, such as the Rent Service.
6. The option now exists for LAs that are operating the Verification Framework to involve registered social landlords in the process of taking and verifying benefit claims. This provides an example of the scope for LAs to work in partnership with other organisations.
7. All this suggests that in addition to having efficient and effective processes, a LA will need to have contingency plans in place. LAs will also need to ensure that they can recruit and retain good quality staff and provide training and development opportunities to help deliver an excellent service.

***BVPIs***

8. The following table shows how top quartile LAs are performing in respect of key BVPIs by English LAs. Where applicable, it also states the DWP aspirational targets which have been set for a number of key Best Value performance indicators (BVPIs) relevant to the HB/CTB theme.

<b>Processing speed and accuracy</b>	<b>Top quartile performance in England 2001/02</b>	<b>DWP aspirational targets for 2006/07</b>
Average time for processing new claims	35 days	36 days
Average processing times for changes of circumstances	8 days	9 days
Percentage of renewal claims processed on time	82%	83%
Accuracy	98.4%	N/A

9. For the Overpayment BVPI top quartile performance by authorities in England represented 64% of recoverable debt (recorded since April 2000) being recovered. However, it should be noted that performance against this PI might reduce year on year if a high level of unrecovered debt is brought forward from previous year(s).
10. With regard to the Security BVPI, in 2001/02, most LAs were found to satisfy the requirements of this PI.

11. Under BVPI arrangements LAs are required to undertake a benefits user satisfaction survey every 3<sup>rd</sup> year. The last survey was undertaken in 2000/01. The next survey is due this year. The last survey showed that the majority of users were satisfied with the level of service and assistance provided by LAs – but results varied from LA to LA with London Boroughs typically having fewer satisfied customers. Across all LAs lower levels of satisfaction were logged against when users were asked about the length of time it took for a decision to be made on their benefits claim.
12. Further information on BVPIs is available from the ODPM web site. High level information from the BVPI customer survey 2000/01 is available from the Topline Report.

***Legal requirements - 14 day achievement***

13. As part of its quarterly monitoring arrangements DWP also considers performance against 14-day performance. The table below shows the top quartile performance for 2001/02 plus the top quartile performance for the first three-quarters of 2002/03.

<b>New claims decided within 14 day - top quartile performance by English LAs in 2001/02</b>	2001/02	2002/03 quarter 1	2002/03 quarter 2	2002/03 quarter 3
14 day to decision	87%	90%	88%	84%
14 day to payment	83%	86%	84%	80%

***HB/CTB Performance Standards***

14. The BFI's benefits service assessment for single tier LAs under CPA was based on compliance/achievement against Performance Standards, taking account of BVPIs and the impact of other performance factors.
15. Where an authority achieved 80% success and above for the BFI CPA this translated to a top score of “4” for the Audit Commission’s service scorecard. The BFI assessments for single tier LAs were carried out during 2002 and published in December of that year. As we are now a year on from their publication, we might expect LAs compliance with Performance Standards to be higher now than they were then.

***Other outcomes***

16. A Beacon Council should be able to demonstrate that it is doing well in respect of BVPIs, legal requirements and Performance Standards. But also that it is working in innovative ways with other organisations to meet its objectives – with a focus on helping people meet their housing costs and providing support to those moving into work or in between jobs.
17. As already mentioned, within the legislative framework, LAs have considerable scope to decide how they will administer their HB/CTB service and how it would best support the overall objectives of the council. A LA may have introduced a range of other indicators to help measure the performance of its service and enable early corrective action to be taken if performance starts to go off target.

***What a Beacon Council should be able to demonstrate***

18. We conclude that, at a high level, Beacon Council will:

- a) Have a clear strategy for its HB/CTB service, backed up with policies, plans and comprehensive monitoring arrangements – The Strategic Management section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. The council will also have undertaken a full assessment of its performance against the HB/CTB Performance Standards and will be able to show that:
- it has used the self assessment findings, amongst other things, to inform its strategies and
  - has clear plans for, and is making progress in, delivering improvements where they are needed and in some areas may be performing above standard or have plans for doing so.
- b) Process claims speedily and accurately - achieving consistently high performance against national PIs and 14 day measures, whilst verifying claims to a standard that at least matches DWP's Verification Framework. The Processing of Claims section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. But this is also an area where a council can demonstrate that it has good links and/or partnership arrangements in place (e.g. with JobCentre Plus, Pension Service, private landlords and the Rent Service) to help it deliver excellent claims processing performance. There should also be evidence that it deals with rapid reclaims and extended payments effectively and efficiently, and that it operates special arrangements for identifying and fast tracking in work claims.
- c) Provide quality customer services – covering such matters as service availability and accessibility, benefit take-up, clarity of forms and advice provided by staff. The Customer Services section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. But a council must also be able to show that:
- high levels of customer satisfaction are achieved. Customer surveys can show levels of satisfaction and the authority should also be able to show how survey findings are used to review and develop the service. (NB all authorities were required to undertake a customer survey in 2000/01 to inform a Best Value PI and a repeat exercise is due to be undertaken in 2003/04)
  - works with other organisations to deliver its service, for example in such areas as encouraging awareness and take-up, maximising accessibility to the service, reducing barriers to work, supporting vulnerable people, tackling social exclusion.
- d) Have established good working relationship with registered social landlords (RSLs), private landlords, its own Housing Department and its own Revenues Department for CTB and, possibly, overpayment recovery. The Working with Landlords section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. The council will work to ensure landlords understand their rights and responsibilities, information exchange arrangements will be effective and some RSLs may be collecting evidence on behalf of the council in support of claims.
- e) Be able to show that the above have been achieved without compromising the secure operation of the system, counter fraud work and/or work to minimise and recover overpayment. Work in all these areas needs to be sound. The following sections in HB/CTB Performance Standards are relevant here:
- Internal Security
  - Counter-fraud
  - Overpayments.

## Section 2 - User Satisfaction in Benefits Administration

20. Much national quantitative data exists on the subject of housing and council tax benefit, but little that focuses specifically on the perceptions of how well local agencies and councils *help people meet their housing needs and supports those moving into work*. Most national data looks at satisfaction with the Benefits Office and with housing and council tax benefits, the majority of which comes from the Best Value survey two years ago.

### **The Benefits Survey, Best Value (BV80)**

21. As part of the suite of BVPI surveys carried out in 2000/2001, all local authorities with responsibility for housing and council tax benefit carried out a survey of a randomly selected sample of benefits claimants who had made a new or renewal claim for housing or council tax benefit during either of two periods, each of two months in duration.

22. The survey asked about several aspects of the Benefits service – contact facilities at the Benefits Office, the service in the Benefits Office, the telephone service, the clarity of forms and leaflets, the staff and the time taken to receive a decision.

23. As with the General survey questions on cultural and recreational services, the ODPM report on the topline BVPI findings does not report on the results in full, but gives full results for three of the Benefits BVPI questions. The other three referred to here have been calculated by MORI from the audited BVPI dataset on the ODPM website, using the same principles for analysis as for the General survey.

24. Around eight in ten (79%) benefits claimants in England are satisfied with the **facilities to get in touch with the Benefits Office**, with one in ten dissatisfied. There is a fairly consistent pattern across authority types, though in London 69% are satisfied and 18% dissatisfied (nearly twice the national average).

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#### **BV80 - Satisfied overall with the facilities to get in touch with the benefits office**

	<b>England</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Metro-politan Boroughs</b>	<b>Unitary authorities</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(278)	(180)	(31)	(38)	(29)
Strongly agree	18	19	17	17	15
Agree	61	63	60	60	54
Neither agree nor disagree	11	10	11	12	13
Disagree	6	5	7	7	11
Strongly disagree	4	3	4	4	7
Agree	79	82	77	77	69
Disagree	10	8	11	11	18
Net agree	+69	+74	+66	+66	+51

*Source: ODPM*

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25. As can be seen below, over half of benefits claimants are satisfied both with the **service in the actual office** (80%) and **the telephone service** (70%). Results are consistent across authority type, though London Boroughs score lower than other types of authority, particularly with regard to service over the telephone.

<b>BV80 - Satisfied with the service in the actual office</b>					
	<b>England</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Metro-politan Boroughs</b>	<b>Unitary authorities</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(325)	(221)	(34)	(38)	(32)
Strongly/agree	80	82	79	79	68

*Source: ODPM*

<b>BV80 - Satisfied with the telephone service</b>					
	<b>England</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Metro-politan Boroughs</b>	<b>Unitary authorities</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(325)	(221)	(34)	(38)	(32)
Strongly/agree	70	74	66	66	51

*Source: ODPM*

26. Around three in five (62%) of benefits claimants are satisfied with **the clarity and understandability of the forms, leaflets and letters**, and results are consistent across authority type.

<b>BV80 - Satisfied with the clarity and understandability of the forms, leaflets and letters</b>					
	<b>England</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Metro-politan Boroughs</b>	<b>Unitary authorities</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(324)	(220)	(34)	(38)	(32)
Strongly/agree	62	62	61	61	60

*Source: ODPM*

27. Four in five benefits claimants nationally (82%) are satisfied with **the staff in the benefits office**, with 7% dissatisfied. As with the other Benefits Survey indicators, results are consistent by authority type, with the exception of London. Here dissatisfaction is twice the national average (13%).

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**BV80 - Satisfied with the staff in the benefits office**


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	England	District Councils	Metropolitan Boroughs	Unitary authorities	London Boroughs
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(276)	(180)	(31)	(38)	(29)
Strongly agree	23	25	22	22	19
Agree	59	60	60	59	54
Neither agree nor disagree	10	10	11	11	14
Disagree	5	4	5	5	8
Strongly disagree	2	2	2	3	5
Agree	82	85	82	81	73
Disagree	7	6	7	8	13
Net agree	+75	+79	+75	+73	+60

*Source: ODPM*

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28. Around two-thirds of claimants are satisfied with **the amount of time it took to tell them whether their claim was successful** (68%), with 22% dissatisfied. A relatively high proportion of claimants in London are dissatisfied with the time taken (31%), compared with England as a whole.

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**BV80 - Satisfied with the amount of time it took to tell them whether their claim was successful**


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	England	District Councils	Metropolitan Boroughs	Unitary authorities	London Boroughs
<i>Base: All LAs</i>	(276)	(179)	(31)	(37)	(29)
Strongly agree	14	14	14	13	12
Agree	54	56	53	53	47
Neither agree nor disagree	11	10	12	11	12
Disagree	12	11	12	14	17
Strongly disagree	10	9	9	10	14
Agree	68	70	67	66	59
Disagree	22	20	21	24	31
Net agree	+46	+50	+46	+42	+28

*Source: ODPM*

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29. The following tables outline data taken from Best Value surveys undertaken in 2000 or the first of the BV Evaluation studies in 2001. The table below shows that roughly three in five users of housing and council tax benefits are satisfied with this service. The small sample size however means that it is not possible to compare the results by type of authority.

**Q** *How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way in which housing and council tax benefits is provided in your local area?*

	1998 %	2000 %	2001 %
<i>Base: All service users</i>	(525)	(524)	(508)
Very satisfied	17	20	14
Fairly satisfied	46	43	43
Neither/nor	9	11	11
Fairly dissatisfied	10	7	14
Very dissatisfied	7	10	8
Don't know/not stated	11	9	10
Satisfied	63	63	57
Dissatisfied	17	17	22
Net satisfied	+46	+46	+35

*Source: ODPM (Best Value series, 1998-2001).*

30. The following data illustrate the general lack of awareness among the public about the administration of council tax and housing benefit, and the perception that they are not properly informed about the service.

**Q** *How much, if anything, do you feel you know about how your Council administers and collects Council Tax and Housing and Council Tax Benefit?*

	1998 %	2000 %
<i>Base: All who have lived in the area at least two years.</i>	(2,160)	(2,224)
A great deal	1	1
A fair amount	14	12
Just a little	32	32
Hardly anything	42	44
Don't know	10	10

*Source: ODPM (Best Value series, 1998-2000).*

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**Q** *How well do you think (name of council) keeps residents informed about Council Tax administration and collection?*

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	%
<i>Base: All residents</i>	<i>(2,568)</i>
Very well	12
Fairly well	50
Not very well	18
Not at all well	6
Don't know/not stated	14

*Source: ODPM (Best Value, 2001).*

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**Q** *In the past two years or so, has your Council asked your views about the way it administers and collects Council Tax and Housing and Council Tax Benefit?*

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	1998 %	2000 %
<i>Base: All who have lived in the area at least two years.</i>	<i>(2,160)</i>	<i>(2,224)</i>
Yes	3	3
No	87	87
Don't know	10	10

*Source: ODPM (Best Value series, 1998-2000).*

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