

Executive summary
**Local authorities' experience of carrying out
DETR Best Value Surveys**

*A report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
by
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1 Introduction

1.1 Data sources

The Social Survey Division of ONS was invited by DETR to review the way in which local authorities had carried out the various surveys in the 2000/01 Best Value project. In carrying out this review SSD had access to different three sources of information:

- the ‘management databases’ set up by ATP to provide summary details of how the various surveys were carried out
- in-depth interviews carried out by SSD with selected local authority staff; and
- the contents of letters and e-mails, sent by local authorities to DETR, requesting further guidance on how to carry out the Best Value surveys.

SSD also had access to both the Yellow Book and the Purple Book, that is, to written guidance on carrying out the surveys provided for authorities by DETR.

In what follows, if no reference is made to a specific survey this indicates that the comments reported apply equally to all the surveys apart from the Libraries Survey. This survey is dealt with in a separate section of its own.

While it is true that interviews with local authorities revealed some examples of less than ideal practices in carrying out the surveys, it is also true that more than one authority whose implementation of a survey or surveys had been less than ideal had been alerted by their experiences to the need to measure their own performance and their customers’ perception of it.

1.2 Management databases

The management databases were analysed using SPSS. Frequency distributions for the sample as a whole were examined in order to identify authorities to be included in the sample of those whose staff would be interviewed. Further analyses concentrated on seeing whether differences in, say, response rates or whether or not an authority had contracted out a survey was related to authority type.

The information in the management databases was less useful than it might have been in providing measures of how well authorities had carried out their surveys. This was largely due to authorities not understanding exactly what information they needed to return to DETR about each survey, or the format in which the data should be returned.

This summary does not include details of the substantive data in the management databases.

1.3 Characteristics of the sample of authorities selected for in-depth interviews

A total of 25 authorities were selected for interview. (Staff in some authorities commented on more than one BVPI survey.) Those selected covered a range of different authority types and also a range of authorities in terms of how well they carried out the various surveys in the Best Value exercise. Also included were a small number of authorities that had had more contact than most with DETR or that had expressed their dissatisfaction to the Department at having the Best Value surveys imposed upon them.

1.4 Structure of the in-depth interviews

A topic guide was designed which indicated the key areas to be covered in interviews with local authority staff. These were:

- Resources (staff and funding);

- How surveys were carried out (contracted out or in-house, postal questionnaire or face-to-face interviews etc.);
- Sampling (which sampling frame was used; how useful was the guidance on sampling; was random sampling used; were the samples stratified; were sub-groups over-sampled?)
- Timing and time-tabling;
- Details of the LAs' relationship with their contractors (if used);
- Response (how was the target response rate estimated; was it achieved; how was the final response rate calculated; what, if anything, was done to enhance response?);
- DETR guidance (was it used; how useful was it; did the LA encounter problems with confidence intervals, weighting, sampling; did the LA contact DETR; how did the authorities rate the advice provided by DETR?);
- BVPI questionnaires (views on the compulsory questions; views on the wording of questions; whether or not additional local questions were added; placement of additional questions);
- Planning Survey (did the LA distinguish between applicants acting on their own behalf, on behalf of their employer/ their business, or as an agent; did they think agents were answering classification questions on behalf of themselves or their clients; did the outcome of applications have any effect on respondents' answers; how did they deal with people other than applicants who submitted comments - were they sampled; how clear was the guidance; how appropriate were the BVPI questions to people commenting on planning applications?).

1.5 Letters and e-mails

The contents of letters and e-mails were used to amplify what was revealed in the course of interviews with local authority staff.

2 Main findings (General Survey, Tenants Survey, Housing Benefits Survey and Planning Survey)

2.1 Resources

2.1.1 Staffing and funding

Many authorities had difficulty finding or securing an adequate budget to carry out the BVPI satisfaction surveys, or finding sufficient staff either to carry out the work in-house or to manage the process if the work was out-sourced. In some cases the limit on resources compromised the quality of the surveys authorities were able to carry out.

Some of the larger authorities had dedicated research or corporate development units that could handle all work associated with the BVPI requirements. Many of these units were already carrying out regular consultation with local residents. Where such a core of experience existed, the BVPI work was more easily accommodated. At the other extreme were authorities trying to handle the survey in-house, using existing staff with little or no research experience to carry out the work. Many authorities had not realised the level of staff resource that would be needed.

2.1.2 Ring fencing budgets

Local authorities did, of course, receive financial resources that were intended to cover the cost of carrying out BVPI surveys. However, it seems that few had ring-fenced any of this funding specifically for the surveys. Authorities told us of having to contain the cost

of running the surveys within existing budgets or use funding that was intended for other projects.

2.1.3 Convincing local councillors of the need for extra resources

Staff in some authorities had to make a case to their local councillors for special funding to carry out the surveys. This could be difficult in authorities that had already established a local consultation process using a residents' panel selected by quota sampling, as staff then had to explain that implementing DETR's Best Value methodology meant that additional resources were needed.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Contracting out

There were a number of reasons why Local Authorities contracted out all or part of the work of setting up and running surveys to a contractor:

- they did not have the necessary skills to do the work in-house;
- they had the skills but not have enough staff to carry out surveys of the size and type required for Best Value;
- they found the timetable laid down for the surveys too short for the them to be able do the work in-house;
- they found that they could join other Local Authorities in a consortium and save money while sharing expertise;
- they had decided to use face-to-face interviewing in order to improve data quality and therefore needed access to trained household interviewers.

2.2.2 Administering questionnaires

Most authorities interviewed had carried out postal surveys, but some had decided on face-to-face interviews because they felt that this was the only way to achieve anything like the response rate specified in the guidance. Authorities that had chosen this method of administering their questionnaires had no option but to contract out the work of running the surveys.

Lack of resources sometimes led authorities to limit the number of reminders they sent out for postal surveys to one. Some authorities sent no reminders at all. A few authorities made no effort to enhance response because they felt that the BV surveys had been imposed on them

2.2.3 Sampling

It is clear that many authorities do not understand random sampling and are much more familiar with quota sampling. These authorities argued that quota samples were superior to random samples because, unlike with random samples, it was possible to guarantee that they matched the profile of the population being surveyed. Many authorities do not realise that quotas samples, while appearing to be representative, will be subject to unmeasurable non-response bias.

When local authority staff were asked if they had considered stratifying random samples to improve their representativeness, their answer indicated that some of them thought doing this would be against the rules as it would 'not be random sampling'. Similarly, they did not always realise that, within their boundaries, areas could be over-sampled to allow for local area analysis, and the results reweighted to compensate for the oversampling before BVPI returns were made to DETR.

Some authorities whose staff had insufficient technical ability to be able to understand and implement the recommendations in the guidance, decided to avoid the issue of sampling for the surveys of housing benefit claimants and local authority tenants and simply carry out a census. In other authorities where a census of claimants had been carried out, the main reason for such an approach was lack of time to develop and implement a sampling procedure. On occasion this came about because details of what was required in order to carry out a survey had been sent to a central point in an authority and had not passed on to the staff responsible for operationalising requirements until much later. (Lack of time also led to authorities contracting out surveys.) A third reason was that some authorities were expecting a poor response to the survey and reasoned that if they carried out a census they would at least increase their chances of meeting DETR's requirements with respect to confidence intervals.

Some authorities with large numbers of planning applications to register encountered difficulties creating a sample of planning applicants because they did not have records or databases in a form that made it easy to ensure lack of duplication across all four sample windows. In authorities with low volumes of applications records could be visually inspected. Faced with the task of creating an acceptable sample of planning applicants with limited staff resources and within the time specified, a few authorities ignored the guidance completely and mailed out a questionnaire with every planning decision notice.

2.2.4 Sampling frames

While most authorities used the small users' Post Office Address file, several reported using the Electoral Register as a sampling frame for the General Survey. Because the guidance was unclear, not all of the latter were sure that the Electoral Register was a legitimate option. One authority had used its council tax records – something that is legally prohibited.

The rules governing housing benefit claims allow, on occasion, for a claim to be made in respect of a second adult in a household. Authorities felt that the DETR guidance did not make it clear whether or not a second adult should be included in the sample of benefit claimants.

2.2.5 Extracting cases from sampling frames

For the housing benefits surveys LAs had no option but to use their own claimant records. These were often not in a format from which it was easy to draw a sample. Authorities reported spending much more time than they had expected developing and writing programs to extract samples of claimants and then checking samples to make sure that claimants were included once only. Not all authorities were successful in eliminating duplicate records.

2.2.6 Response

Some authorities did not see achieving acceptable response rates to the Best Value surveys as a priority and simply accepted that they would be low. In some of these authorities the emphasis was on achieving enough cases to meet the Best Value confidence interval criteria rather than on achieving an acceptable response rate.

While many authorities calculated their response rates correctly, others simply did not have the relevant information to do so, or were confused about how to carry out the calculations.

The response rates authorities expected to achieve varied from 10% to 60%. Sometimes low expectations reflected lack of experience in carrying out surveys. In the case of the Benefits Survey they were based on the advice of contractors who anticipated difficulty in getting benefit claimants to respond.

2.2.7 *Weighting*

Authorities that normally used quota sampling had no experience of weighting data. Some authorities reported that their contractors also had difficulty understanding and dealing with the concept. However, there were authorities whose data were weighted for non-response, and some of these had carried out the weighting calculations themselves, using the guidance.

2.3 **Authorities' relationships with contractors**

2.3.1 *Handling contracts*

Not all authorities that contacted out their surveys had staff with the skills needed to draft a workable specification for the contractor and then monitor how the work was carried out. Indeed, some of these authorities simply handed over the Yellow and Purple Books to the market research company to which they had awarded the contact for setting up and running a survey and asked them to follow the procedures laid down therein.

2.3.2 *Technical reports*

Some authorities did not commission a technical report from their contractor but some who did reported having to insist that such a report be provided. Not all technical reports provided enough detail to allow an assessment to be made of how well contractors had run the surveys in question.

2.4 **View on the guidance provided by DETR**

2.4.1 *General views*

There were a variety of general views about the Guidance. Local Authority staff with some research skills were able to use it for reference and were often complimentary, citing in particular its comprehensiveness. For others with less experience, its size, style and content could be daunting.

Some of the staff interviewed commented that the Guidance was "*not forceful enough*" and that it did not always make clear what it was they were required to do. So, for example, whether residents' panels could be used or not was buried in what was seen as a discussion paper on the merits of different sampling methods.

Some authorities commented that the Yellow Book reached them too late and pointed out also that the guidance it gave was not always consistent with that in the Purple Book.

2.4.2 *Guidance on weighting and on response issues*

Authorities suggested that the section of the guidance dealing with weighting should include more detail about how to carry out this procedure. It was also evident from interviews with local authority staff that the section on response needs to give clear definitions of what is meant by full or partial co-operation, non-contacts, refusals and ineligible cases, as well as a standard way of calculating and reporting response.

Many authorities considered a target response rate of 50% for a postal survey to be beyond anything they or their contractors considered attainable and were therefore dismissive of this aspect of the guidance. However, some authorities did meet or exceed the DETR response rate target.

In correspondence with authorities that were having problems getting response, DETR accepted that in the absence of adequate levels of response, what was required from authorities was evidence that they had at least taken reasonable steps to achieve adequate response.

2.4.3 *Guidance on sampling*

The DLTR guidance from the Yellow Book provides a clear justification for using random sampling, but one that is written in an academic style that some local authority staff found hard to understand. As we have seen, some Local Authorities are more familiar with research based on quota samples and are used to working with contractors for whom this is the normal and preferred method. In contradiction of the guidance some contractors had advised authorities that quota samples were or should have been acceptable for Best Value surveys.

It is worth re-emphasising here that some authorities felt strongly that DETR's requirement that achieved Best Value samples be representative of local populations was not consistent with their requirement that samples be based on random selection.

Larger local authorities interviewed about their Planning Surveys pointed out that the sorts of applications they register, such as the siting of incineration plants, large housing developments, as well as the characteristics of the applicants, for example large commercial organisations or non-profit-making bodies like Health Trusts, led them to wonder if it was appropriate for such applications and applicants should be included in the BVPI surveys.

One authority chose to ignore the guidance about planning surveys and leave agents out of its sample of applicants. Its rationale was that it dealt with up to 15 agents who, together, accounted for about 40% of all its planning applications and were it to sample each agent once only, a large proportion of the potential sample of applications would be 'lost'. In only a small minority of cases in this authority did applicants claim not to be able to complete the questionnaire because their applications were being dealt with by an agent. Clearly the majority of applicants here had been kept fully informed by their agents. Other authorities complained that by the time they were creating the sample for the fourth window sample of planning applications, the number of eligible cases had been reduced considerably because of the DETR requirement that agents be sampled once only.

Some authorities felt that agents caused delays in the planning procedure which authorities were then blamed for by applicants, and that it was therefore better to send questionnaires to agents rather than applicants.

While, from a sampling viewpoint, it is acceptable to ask agents about one application only, authorities were often uneasy about the procedure, especially if an agent's experience of that single application had been an unhappy one.

2.5 **The BVPI questions**

2.5.1 *General views*

Some authorities accepted the BVPI questions for the General Survey and used them in their original form. Others were more critical of the wording of the questions and of the requirement that locally relevant terms, if needed, be added in brackets. The latter, they felt, made questions clumsy and was unnecessarily prescriptive. Authorities were also critical of the ruling that additional questions could be added before or after BVPI questions only, and some ignored it. Their view was that this resulted in questionnaires in which the flow of questions was disrupted and meant that respondents might have to return to topics already dealt with in BVPI questions.

Many authorities were confused about whether or not all BVPI questions had to be asked and what the rules were if an authority shared responsibility for the provision of a service. Authorities with no managerial control over a service or that contributed limited funding only (as was the case particularly with transport BVPIs and the provision of cultural and sporting facilities) were also often uncertain about what to do.

Some authorities not only found the Guidance about question wording and placement unclear, but also had difficulties understanding the advice they received directly from DETR.

As for the Housing Benefits Survey: some authorities were not happy with the idea of measuring customer satisfaction with so few questions and rehearsed many of the well-known objections to measuring satisfaction at all. Others were more positive and had started making use of results from the survey to improve the benefit service they provided

2.5.2 *Topic areas*

Many authorities commented that the number of questions on waste disposal seemed excessive and the requirement to include all of them made the interview unbalanced. Some authorities were adamant that a survey that started with several questions about waste collection and used terminology such as "*the receptacle provided for your household waste*" would not be of interest to their residents.

The requirement to ask questions about facilities such as theatres and the like was sometimes misunderstood. Some authorities asked the set of questions as a whole about each individual facility they provided. While this would be a viable strategy for authorities that provided few facilities, in those that provided several it resulted in a lengthy interview.

Many authorities argued that the BVPI questions for the General Survey did not reflect local concerns and that this made the questionnaire of less interest to their residents. This state of affairs was not improved by the failure of most authorities to add questions of their own that addressed local issues. Some authorities argued that the combination of clumsy questions, needlessly formal sounding terminology and a lack of relevance to local residents contributed to poor response.

There was concern on the part of some authorities that respondents to the Planning Survey might confuse their experience of the process with the outcome of the process, but most were confident that respondents could make this distinction. On the whole, questions about the planning process were the least problematic of all BVPI questions. However, questions about the demographic characteristics of applicants did lead to difficulties when the applicant was an organisation or business, and some authorities questioned the need to ask for the age, sex and ethnicity of agents as did some of the agents themselves. These questions were easier to justify when asked of applicants but not all applicants appreciated this and complained about being asked for details of their age and ethnicity.

The Planning Survey questionnaire does not handle joint planning applications well, nor does the guidance deal with the issues raised by such applications.

2.6 **Authorities' contact with DETR**

Authorities' views were mixed about the quality and consistency of the advice they received when they contacted DETR. Most authorities were generally appreciative about the help they got and accepted that both they and the Department's staff were going through the BV survey process for the first time. However, authorities also commented that they did not always get consistent answers if they spoke at different times to different people at DETR. In particular they mentioned getting inconsistent advice about the use of residents' panels and whether or not BVPI questions could be omitted if an authority had no responsibility for managing or funding the service asked about.

On occasion DETR contacts seemed unable or unwilling to give definitive answers to authorities' questions and referred them back to the guidance. Criticisms were also voiced about the Department's inability to provide quick turnaround for e-mail and telephone enquiries and also for failing to provide its help facility on a daily basis.

2.7 Using Residents' Panels as a basis for the General Survey

2.7.1 How panels were selected

Some authorities were allowed to use residents panels, recruited using probability random sampling, as a population from which to select a random sample of residents for the General Survey. However, in some cases the randomness of the panels had been compromised because authorities seeking to ensure that specific age groups or ethnic groups were included had made use of purposive sampling.

2.7.2 Panel attrition

When panel members drop out replacements are required. Some Local Authorities took replacements from a reserve list of people from the original recruitment exercise, but these replacements were sometimes chosen purposively rather than being selected from a stratified list as matches for the panel members who had dropped out.

Other authorities recruited replacement members by asking for volunteers.

2.7.3 Panel conditioning

As a result of taking part in a number of consultation exercises panels can become more familiar with and knowledgeable about the issues being discussed than other local residents. This process is known as conditioning. To avoid it panel members should be replaced at regular intervals. Using a panel that had been in operation for some time to carry out the General Survey could therefore bias the results. At least one Authority had got round this problem by setting up a new panel using random sampling and using it for the first time for the General Survey. This Authority planned to replace their panel every three years so that the new panel could be used to carry out Best Value General Surveys.

2.7.4 Panel response rate

None of the all authorities whose staff were interviewed and who used residents' panels as samples for the General Survey took account of the response rate achieved when the panels were first recruited when calculating response to the survey. This could dramatically enhance the survey's apparent response rate. In one example response to the panel recruitment was about 11%. A total of 82% of the panel responded to the General Survey, and this was reported as the response rate. However, if the initial response had been taken into account the true response rate would have been nearer 9%.

3 Library Surveys

3.1 Introduction

The themes reported on in this section of the summary were identified in the course of interviews with local authority staff responsible for carrying out surveys of libraries, with the chair of the Association of Chief Librarians (ACL) and with representatives of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), the organisation responsible for developing the methodology of the Public Libraries User Surveys (PLUS).

The findings are reported under similar headings to those used in respect of the other surveys:

- resources and research expertise,
- views of the guidance provided by DETR,
- sampling ,
- response rates and
- views on the BVPI questions.

A final section presents themes from discussions with a member of the Society of Chief Librarians and a representative of CIPFA.

3.2 Resources and research expertise

Lack of adequate resources to carry out the Library surveys was widespread. For many authorities the only staff they could use to carry out the surveys were those employed in running the libraries. Using these staff and the existing budget to carry out the survey meant either that the normal services they provided would have to be dropped temporarily or that fewer books would be bought.

Some authorities used library staff to hand out questionnaires, some used market research interviewers and others made use of staff that normally covered for sickness and holidays. The most that in-house staff received in the way of training was two hours spent on learning how to approach members of the public. Many received no training at all.

3.3 Guidance

The guidance provided by DETR originally led some local authorities to misunderstand the sampling requirements for the Library Survey. DETR intended authorities to include all their libraries in the sample and the guidance suggested that the PLUS methodology would be acceptable. Their advice overlooked the fact that PLUS uses a sample of libraries within each authority. DETR's guidance also suggested that in order to meet the Best Value confidence interval standards a minimum of 1,000 questionnaires would have to be completed – a total which would make between-library comparisons within some authorities impossible. Some authorities read all the documentation and realised that the methodology required by the DETR was very different from the methodology normally employed on PLUS surveys and that one consequence would be that more staff than usual would be needed to hand out questionnaires in all libraries.

This confusion led to correspondence between DETR and CIPFA which resulted in authorities being allowed to follow the PLUS model and carry out the survey in a sample of libraries

As was the case with the other Best Values surveys, some authorities were very complimentary about the guidance provided by DETR. However, others did not understand the concept of confidence intervals and would have welcomed more worked examples of how to calculate them. Some authorities contracted out the analysis of their libraries data to CIPFA and were not affected by this section of the guidance.

3.4 Sampling

The PLUS model starts from a sample of libraries within each authority (except where the total number is small, in which case all libraries are included in the sample). Once a sample of libraries is available, the guidance for the PLUS survey offers three options for sampling library users:

- a census can be taken of all library users in one week,
- a sample of library users can be handed questionnaires, with the size of the sample based on the numbers of that would need to be approached to achieve 1,000 completed questionnaires in total,
- a template could be used that specifies designated time slots for distributing questionnaires.

There were variations between authorities in how closely they adhered to acceptable sampling methodologies. For example, some deviated from purely systematic samples in order to ensure sufficient library users in specific age groups. Others, in which the quotas of questionnaires to be handed out daily had been specified, provided no guidance to their staff on exactly how questionnaires should be handed out in each time slot.

3.5 Response

Authorities with response rates in the 80%-90% range were not uncommon. Response varied according to the size and type of library, with smaller libraries reporting better response rates than larger ones.

The PLUS methodology suggests that local authorities include a unique serial number on each questionnaire handed out in order to provide some idea of the response rate achieved. Questionnaires that were returned blank should have been treated as refusals. Unfortunately some authorities re-used these blank questionnaires.

Except in very small libraries, there was little possibility of avoiding sampling users more than once. Moreover, users who refused to complete a second questionnaire were treated as refusals by some authorities, rather than as ineligibles, which had the effect of inappropriately reducing response rates.

Some authorities merely handed out questionnaires in the survey week but others took steps to enhance response. One sent out fliers and put up notices in libraries a week before the survey was due to take place. Other authorities offered respondents pre-paid reply envelopes, chairs and tables at which to complete questionnaires and also refreshments. In some places it was suspected that the survey was a precursor of the closing down of libraries, so this had to be dealt with in pre-publicity.

Common views did not appear to exist about how to deal with partially completed questionnaires. Some authorities considered it a response if any information had been provided, others designated questionnaires as refusals if insufficient information in their opinion had been provided.

Some authorities tried to compare the characteristics of respondents with their profiles of registered users, even though it is not necessary to be registered in order to use a library.

The Library survey is exclusively concerned with library users. Staff in some authorities suggested that in the future a question be included on the general survey designed to access the views of non-users. In fact there is such a question on the General Survey questionnaire.

3.6 BVPI questions

The DETR guidance indicated that BVPI 118 would be covered by existing questions on the PLUS questionnaire when in fact this is not the case. BV requires a distinction to be made between requests for information and a request to reserve a book that is not covered by PLUS. Local authorities were not made aware of this.

Library users who had failed to find a book they were looking for were asked whether or not they had gone on to reserve it. Some authorities found these questions particularly useful because they revealed how many library users were unaware that there was such a thing as a reservation service. Authorities were less happy about asking library users if they were satisfied with the reservation process. They felt that the PLUS question about how long it took for a customer to get a reserved book was of more use.

The BVPI question dealing with how many library users found the book they were looking for did not take account of the fact that not everyone enters a library with the intention of finding a particular book or indeed any book. This question also overlooks the different expectations of users of small libraries and large libraries.

3.7 Views of Society of Chief Librarians and CIPFA

The Association of Chief Librarians and CIPFA echoed concerns described earlier about the effect of DETR's approach to the Libraries Survey. They pointed out that PLUS is intended to be used by Local Authorities that have a rolling programme of library surveys and therefore recommends sampling a proportion of libraries in any one year. The Best Value approach

was to sample all libraries in the survey year, which, as we have seen, caused problems with staff resources for some authorities. ACL and CIPFA said that when carrying out a PLUS survey authorities rarely limited themselves the minimum of 1,000 completed questionnaire, yet no fewer than 30% of authorities went for the minimum of 1,000 for the Best Value survey. The effect of this limitation in large authorities that followed DETR guidance to include all libraries in their sample, would be that some small libraries would be handing at most out two or three questionnaires.

ACL and CIPFA added that their figures indicated that no more than about 15 out of 1,000 library visitors would reserve a book and that as a result BVPI 118 would not work.

Libraries vary in the methods they use for logging visitor numbers but whatever method is used, a count of visits will not only include children but will also overestimate the number of adults visiting a library. It is therefore not a completely reliable basis for working out how many questionnaires need to be handed out in a survey of adult users in order to achieve a given sample.

ACL and CIPFA would like to agree a methodology for the Best Value survey and the PLUS survey that would allow DETR requirements to dovetail with the programme that libraries using the PLUS system undertake. They would also like to review the DETR's topic areas. The Department of Media, Culture and Sport has identified 19 public library standards that libraries are expected to collect statistics on. ACL and CIPFA would like their two bodies to get together with DCMS and DETR to integrate their approaches to library surveys, both in terms of the questions asked, timetable and the sample design to be used.

4 Conclusions

In this section of the report the conclusions and recommendations presented earlier in the report at the end of the survey specific sections are reproduced in a less discursive format that focuses more on technical issues.

4.1 Recommendations

4.1.1 Management databases

- DETR should require Local Authorities to provide an explanation for data missing from the management database.
- Internal consistency checks need to be established as part of the data entry process.
- DETR should provide Local Authorities with a more structured format for their technical data returns, including templates for specific information such as response rates.

4.1.2 All surveys

4.1.2.1 The guidance

LAs with expertise had fewer problems with the guidance than those without; the latter often found it hard to understand. This was particularly the case with guidance on more technical aspects such as sampling, calculating confidence intervals and weighting. Reactions of authority staff suggest that the guidance on technical topics needs to be rewritten in simpler language and needs to be tested on people with little or no technical expertise in setting up surveys. In addition, brief step-by-step guides to the technical aspects of carrying out a

survey would also be useful for people who do not wish to read all the guidance.

Furthermore, if it is to meet the needs of local authority staff with little expertise in carrying out surveys, the guidance needs make it clearer to local authorities which survey procedures they have some control over and which – like methods of calculating response rates, confidence intervals and weights – they do not.

4.1.2.2 Resources

Some local authority staff were surprised at how much staff time was needed to organise and run the BVPI surveys. In some cases lack of staff resources meant that the surveys were not carried out as well as they might have been. In other cases lack of financial resources to cover operational aspects of the surveys limited the quality of the surveys. It would clearly be helpful if in future the guidance were to provide authorities with a realistic idea of the staff and financial resources that are likely to be needed to carry out each BVPI survey.

On occasion staff did not have as much time as they would have liked to implement surveys because the guidance, though sent to their authority at the appropriate time by DETR was not passed on to them promptly by their own management. Some authorities then decided to carry out censuses rather than surveys. In future DETR should consider emphasising to authorities the importance of making sure that relevant staff are aware in good time of the need to carry out BVPI surveys and have the necessary guidance passed on to them.

4.1.2.3 Probability sampling

DLTR should consider explaining more fully to local authorities:

- why random samples are required for the BVPI surveys;
- what needs to be done to ensure they are representative, and
- why quota samples are not acceptable.

The Department needs to be aware, however, that authorities that achieved low response rates when using probability sampling may not be easily convinced of the advantages of this methodology.

Since the proportion of people refusing to join a panel is likely to be higher than the proportion refusing to take part in a General Survey, it would be worth DETR considering alternative methodologies, such as allocating resources to recruiting a sample of residents to take part in the General Survey who could then be invited to become a member of a residents' panel. In terms of enhancing response, this would be a better approach for authorities than recruiting a new residents' panel every three years and using it to complete the General Survey.

- The guidance should make it clear that in order to avoid response bias, achieving the specified response rate is as important as meeting the confidence interval requirement by achieving the specified sample size.
- The guidance should be amended so that in future it places more emphasis on methods for enhancing response and provides detailed guidance on how these methods should be implemented.
- The Department should require Local Authorities to demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to achieve a good response rate.

Some authorities were sceptical about the possibility of achieving response rates of 50% - 60% to BVPI surveys. To counter this scepticism DETR should consider drawing attention in the guidance to the good response rates achieved by local authorities who followed closely the approach outlined in the DTLE guidance. If nothing is done some authorities will persist in the belief that the Department is out of touch with the world of local authority surveys.

Response rates would be higher in some authorities if questionnaires were to be administered as face-to-face interviews or by telephone. However, face-to-face interviews cost a great deal more than postal surveys, and surveys administered by telephone are only likely to achieve acceptable response rates if it is possible to send respondents an advance letter, a constraint which rules out random digit dialling and cold calling. Fortunately, postal surveys, if they are carefully designed, with due care paid to getting potential respondents interested and involved and with appropriate means taken to reduce non-response, can, as has been seen, result in acceptable response rates.

A further means of increasing response would be, where possible, to encourage local authorities without survey expertise to join a consortium that would enable them to benefit from the expertise and experience of others and to benefit also from economies of scale. Incidentally, when consortiums contain all tiers of local government from Metropolitan authorities down, this can make issues over levels of responsibility for service provision much easier to handle.

4.1.2.4 Calculating and reporting response

In future DETR should consider including in the guidance a template specifying the information needed to calculate response rates. The method of calculation could be included as part of the template, perhaps as an Excel spreadsheet. A completed template should form part of the Local Authorities technical data return. Each field in the template should be clearly defined, for example:

- set sample:- all addresses or individuals selected from the sampling frame;

- complete response: - all questions that apply to the respondent answered;
- partial response: - this needs to be defined in a way that can be applied by all Local Authorities. Respondents may omit some information but still answer sufficient questions to allow some BVPI scores to be calculated.
- refusals: - cases where the named respondent or someone living at a sampled address has refused to take part, explicitly in writing, by telephone or in person, or implicitly by failing to keep an appointment to be interviewed or by failing to complete a questionnaire despite their eligibility to take part in a survey.
- non-returns or non-contacts -cases where the questionnaire has not been returned or contact was not made with anyone at the sampled address, and there is no evidence that the address is ineligible.
- ineligibles - questionnaires returned (by the Post Office or others) or interview not carried out because an address was:
 - empty, demolished or could not be found;
 - not a dwelling (Some apparently ineligible addresses, such as commercial and retail premises or hotels, guesthouses, hostels and public houses may contain a dwelling used by a manager, caretaker or owner as their main residence.); or because
 - a sampled individual at an address had moved.

In addition the guidance should make it clear that when authorities report response rates for BVPI for which the sample is a sub-set of people responding to a previous survey, the rate should take account of the level of response achieved by the earlier survey.

4.1.2.5 Weighting

DETR should:

- provide a template, based on the Guidance, to help authorities carry out and document the process of weighting their data.
- make the weighting template, which would show why the data had been weighted as well as documenting the methods used, part of the information to be returned by authorities in their management database.
- set out the conditions in which data from authorities will require weighting.

4.1.2.6 Contracting out

The DETR guidance about contracting out the survey should emphasise the need for Authorities to monitor the survey process. Local authorities should insist that contractors provide a technical report and that the report use DETR-supplied templates to detail how sampling, calculating response rates and weighting were carried out.

4.1.2.7 Sampling

DETR should draft a clear and convincingly worded case for using random samples for the BVPI satisfaction surveys that could be used by staff who have to carry out or manage the survey to assist them in explaining the merits of and need for this approach to their local councillors. Some local authority staff characterised this as a ‘PR leaflet for random sampling’. The existing guidance was seen as too long and too dry to present to local councillors.

4.2 General Survey

4.2.1 Sampling frames

- DETR should ensure that the Purple and Yellow Books both make it clear that the Electoral Register may be used as a sampling frame.
- DETR should investigate Council tax registers to assess their suitability as a sampling frames for Local Authority general population surveys such as the General Survey.

Due to a change in legislation concerning the electoral register and existing legislation on Council tax registers, authorities will be able to use neither the Electoral Register nor the Council Tax Register as sampling frames the next time the General Survey takes place. This leaves the Postcode Address File as the only alternative. In order to create a sample of adults from the PAF in which each member has an equal chance of selection, one eligible person must be selected at random from each sampled address or household and a weight attached to their data to compensate for the fact that the chances of any one person in a household being selected gets smaller as the number of adults in the household increases. One easily applied strategy for selecting an individual at random is to ask the adult household member who has had the most recent birthday to complete the questionnaire. In order to weight the data respondents would have to be asked how many adults there were in their household.

4.2.2 Using Panels for surveys

- DETR guidance about using residents’ panels as the sample for the General Survey needs to be made easier for authorities to find and understand;
- DETR guidance about using *existing* panels as the sample for the General Survey needs to be consistent with advice about panels in general, especially if provided by e-

mails and telephone in response to personal contact on behalf of authorities with the Department.

- Authorities wanting to use residents' panels as a sample for the General Survey should first obtain the Department's agreement. The Department will need to verify that the panel is an acceptable sampling frame. Panels recruited using random sampling should be allowed provided the population from which they were recruited was fully representative of the target population and the recruitment methods used were acceptable;
- A local authority that wants to use an existing panel set up using quota sampling should always be advised that this is unacceptable.

4.2.3 Questionnaires and question wording

- An expert review of the BVPI questions should be carried out to ensure that they are unambiguously worded and use terms that are widely understood;
- The Department should authorise local authorities to use variants to the wording of the questions to accommodate and take account of local circumstances.
- Local authorities should be permitted, with the agreement and help of DETR, to indicate more clearly the limits of their responsibility for the provision of services.
- Local Authorities wanting to make other changes to the questionnaire should have to agree these with the Department.

In addition:

- Authorities should be encouraged both to add questions on existing topics and to use the survey to cover topics of relevance to their area. (This may require more collaboration between DETR and Local Authorities than was possible in the first round of the survey.)
- DETR should make it clear that if local authorities wish to add their own questions within the BVPI module rather than at the end, this approach will be allowed, but the authorities will have to get their questions agreed by DETR first.

4.3 Planning Survey

4.3.1 Sampling

It is clear that the method of sampling used for the planning surveys needs to be looked at again, particularly with regard to the use of sampling windows.

Some local authorities were unhappy with the rule that each agent or applicant should be sampled no more than once over all four sampling windows because it reduced the number of applications that could be covered in their sample. DETR should therefore explain more fully in the guidance why their chosen method is a sound one methodologically. They should also

explain why authorities need not be concerned about the effects of the views of individual agents on the results of the survey and why having relatively low numbers of planning applications in any one year is no bar to meeting the confidence interval requirements.

4.3.2 Questions and questionnaires

4.3.2.1 Classification and ethnicity

Apart from the demographic section the questions asked in the Planning Survey were less of an issue than they were in the other surveys. Questions about age, sex and ethnic group, however, did not seem relevant when applications had been submitted by establishments rather than individuals. If planning applications by establishments are within the scope of the Planning Survey, DETR should consider dropping the demographic questions for this category of applicant. A similar issue exists in relation to agents: the Department might also consider omitting the demographic questions for them also.

4.3.2.2 Joint planning applications

The Department should consider amending the questionnaire so that it handles joint planning applications better than it does now. At present, the questionnaire does not allow for those cases where two people complete a planning application, with the result that in some cases both applicants try to give answers on the same form. Either the questionnaire should specify that only one set of answers is given or the sampling method should ensure that only one person in a joint application receives a questionnaire.

4.4 Tenants Survey

4.4.1 Administering the Tenants Survey as part of a structural survey of authority accommodation

One authority had incorporated their BVPI Tenants Survey questions into a structural survey, also a DETR requirement, of all its rented properties. Although the way in which properties were sampled did not comply with the requirement for the Tenant's survey, this was an approach which made effective use of staff resources and had the added benefit that the BVPI questions were administered as part of a face-to-face interview. This methodology is worth further consideration by the Department.

4.5 Benefits Survey

4.5.1 BVPI questions

Some authorities liked the use of agree/disagree statements in the Benefits questionnaire that were drafted in such a way that 'agree' did not always indicate satisfaction nor 'disagree' dissatisfaction. The Department should, nevertheless, consider rewording the statements. There is ample evidence in the survey research literature that respondents often do not know how to respond when faced with a statement containing the word 'not' with which they

disagree. So, for example, statements in the form ‘The benefits claim form was not easy to fill in’ are much easier for respondents to deal with if they are reworded thus: ‘The benefits claim form was difficult to fill in.’

4.6 **Libraries Survey**

4.6.1 Rationalising the needs of IPF, DCMS and DETR

Given that many authorities already carry out surveys of libraries using the established PLUS methodology and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has set 19 standards that local authority libraries have to report on, DETR should consider rationalising their own needs and those of DCMS within the PLUS methodology.