

**Local authorities' experience of carrying out  
DTLR Best Value Surveys**

*A report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister  
by  
Qualitative Methods Applied to Surveys  
at the  
Office for National Statistics*

*Edited by  
Olwen Rowlands*

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Office for National Statistics  
Qualitative Methods Applied to Surveys  
Data Methodology and Evaluation Division  
1 Drummond Gate  
London SW1V 2QQ

<b>REPORT OF THE FINDINGS OF THE ONS BEST VALUE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND .....	7
1.2 DATA SOURCES & REPORT METHODOLOGY .....	7
1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE OF AUTHORITIES SELECTED FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS.....	8
1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS.....	8
1.5 LETTERS AND E-MAILS.....	9
<b>2 MANAGEMENT DATABASES.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE MANAGEMENT DATABASES.....	9
2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS .....	10
<b>3 THE GENERAL SURVEY.....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	11
3.2 THE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION DATABASE .....	11
3.2.1 <i>Missing information</i> .....	12
3.2.2 <i>Inconsistent information</i> .....	12
3.2.3 <i>Who carried out the survey</i> .....	12
3.2.4 <i>Selecting the Sample</i> .....	12
3.2.5 <i>The population sampled</i> .....	12
3.2.6 <i>The Sampling frame used</i> .....	13
3.2.7 <i>Sampling method</i> .....	13
3.2.8 <i>Sample Window</i> .....	13
3.2.9 <i>Use of Probability samples</i> .....	14
3.2.10 <i>Sample size and confidence intervals</i> .....	14
3.2.11 <i>Reporting Response</i> .....	14
3.2.12 <i>In-house and contracted out survey response rates</i> .....	15
3.2.13 <i>Level of response</i> .....	16
3.2.14 <i>Enhancing response</i> .....	17
3.2.15 <i>Weighting</i> .....	18
3.2.16 <i>Added questions</i> .....	18
3.3 INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES.....	18
3.3.1 <i>Resources</i> .....	18
3.3.2 <i>Contracting out</i> .....	20
3.3.3 <i>Sampling</i> .....	21
3.3.4 <i>Using residents panels as the sample for the General Survey</i> .....	22
3.3.5 <i>Response</i> .....	23
3.3.6 <i>Weighting</i> .....	24
3.3.7 <i>The Guidance (Yellow and Purple Books)</i> .....	25
3.3.8 <i>The BVPI questions</i> .....	26
3.3.9 <i>Contact with DETR</i> .....	27
3.3.10 <i>Differing attitudes to the General Survey</i> .....	27
3.3.11 <i>Timing</i> .....	28
3.4 GENERAL SURVEY CASE STUDIES.....	28
3.4.1 <i>The consortium approach: the view of a lead authority</i> .....	28
3.4.1.1 <i>Resources</i> .....	29
3.4.1.2 <i>Contracting out</i> .....	29
3.4.1.3 <i>Timing</i> .....	29
3.4.1.4 <i>Sampling</i> .....	29
3.4.1.5 <i>Comment</i> .....	29
3.4.2 <i>The consortium approach: the view of a consortium member</i> .....	30
3.4.2.1 <i>Resources</i> .....	30
3.4.2.2 <i>Sample and Method</i> .....	30
3.4.2.3 <i>Monitoring progress</i> .....	30
3.4.2.4 <i>Comment</i> .....	30

3.4.3	<i>The In-house approach</i> .....	30
3.4.3.1	A new Unitary authority that made the most of the opportunity to carry out the General Survey .....	30
3.4.3.2	Methodology .....	31
3.4.3.3	Comment .....	31
3.4.4	<i>Carrying out the survey in-house with some operations bought in</i> .....	32
3.4.5	<i>Contracting-out independently</i> .....	32
3.4.5.1	Face-to-face interviewing.....	32
3.4.5.2	Resources .....	32
3.4.5.3	Methods .....	32
3.4.5.4	Comment .....	33
3.4.6	<i>General Survey: Conclusions and Recommendations</i> .....	33
<b>4</b>	<b>TENANTS SURVEY</b> .....	<b>35</b>
4.1	RESULTS FROM THE MANAGEMENT DATABASE .....	35
4.1.1	<i>Added questions</i> .....	35
4.1.2	<i>Target population</i> .....	35
4.1.3	<i>Was the survey contracted out?</i> .....	35
4.1.4	<i>Was the confidence interval criterion met?</i> .....	35
4.1.5	<i>Sampling frame</i> .....	36
4.1.6	<i>Sampling methods meets the standard</i> .....	36
4.1.7	<i>Were the sampling window rules adhered to?</i> .....	36
4.1.8	<i>Type of survey</i> .....	36
4.1.9	<i>Were the data weighted?</i> .....	36
4.1.10	<i>Questionnaire delivery</i> .....	36
4.1.11	<i>Response rates</i> .....	37
4.2	INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES.....	37
4.2.1	<i>Sampling</i> .....	37
4.2.1.1	The sampling frame.....	37
4.2.1.2	Sample or Census.....	38
4.2.1.3	An alternative approach.....	38
4.2.2	<i>Response rates</i> .....	38
4.2.2.1	What counted as a response? .....	38
4.2.2.2	Response expectations.....	39
4.2.3	<i>Staff Resources</i> .....	39
4.2.4	<i>Funding the Tenants Survey</i> .....	39
4.2.5	<i>The questionnaires and the BVPI questions</i> .....	40
4.2.6	<i>The Guidance</i> .....	40
4.2.7	<i>The letters file</i> .....	41
4.3	TENANTS SURVEY CASE STUDIES .....	41
4.3.1	<i>A contracted-out survey using face-to-face interviews</i> .....	41
4.3.1.1	Resources & Expertise:.....	41
4.3.1.2	Sampling.....	41
4.3.1.3	Face-to-face interviews.....	41
4.3.1.4	Interviewers' approach.....	41
4.3.1.5	The questionnaire.....	42
4.3.1.6	Response Rates .....	42
4.3.1.7	The BVPI Questions:.....	42
4.3.1.8	Adding Questions.....	42
4.3.1.9	Contracting out the survey.....	42
4.3.1.10	DETR guidance.....	43
4.3.2	<i>A postal survey carried out in – house, with some specialised work contracted-out</i> .....	43
4.3.2.1	Resources and Research expertise.....	43
4.3.2.2	Planning and management .....	43
4.3.2.3	Sampling.....	43
4.3.2.4	Response rate.....	44
4.3.2.5	Methods .....	44
4.3.2.6	The questions .....	44
4.3.2.7	DETR Guidance.....	45
4.3.2.8	Using the information.....	45
4.3.2.9	Comment .....	45
4.3.3	<i>A survey of tenants combined with a structural survey</i> .....	45
4.3.3.1	Introduction.....	45
4.3.3.2	Response.....	45
4.3.3.3	Personal contact .....	46

4.3.3.4	Sample.....	46
4.3.3.5	Recommendations.....	46
<b>5</b>	<b>BENEFITS SURVEYS .....</b>	<b>47</b>
5.1	RESULTS FROM THE MANAGEMENT DATABASE.....	47
5.1.1	<i>Adding questions</i> .....	47
5.1.2	<i>Target population</i> .....	47
5.1.3	<i>Was the survey contracted out?</i> .....	47
5.1.4	<i>Was the confidence interval criterion achieved?</i> .....	48
5.1.5	<i>Sampling frame used</i> .....	48
5.1.6	<i>Sampling Windows</i> .....	48
5.1.7	<i>Explanation of sampling method used</i> .....	48
5.1.8	<i>Were the data weighted?</i> .....	48
5.1.9	<i>Questionnaire administration</i> .....	49
5.1.10	<i>Response rates</i> .....	49
5.2	INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES.....	49
5.2.1	<i>The sampling frame</i> .....	49
5.2.2	<i>Sample survey or census</i> .....	50
5.2.3	<i>Response rates</i> .....	51
5.2.3.1	<i>Possible inaccuracies in reported response rates</i> .....	51
5.2.3.2	<i>Response expectations</i> .....	51
5.2.4	<i>Resources available for the BVPI work</i> .....	51
5.2.5	<i>Funding the work</i> .....	52
5.2.6	<i>Planning and Methods</i> .....	52
5.2.7	<i>The BVPI questions</i> .....	53
5.2.8	<i>The Guidance</i> .....	53
5.2.9	<i>A consistent approach</i> .....	53
5.2.10	<i>Positive effects of the Benefits Survey</i> .....	54
5.3	BENEFITS SURVEY CASE STUDIES.....	54
5.3.1	<i>A contracted-out postal survey</i> .....	54
5.3.1.1	<i>Staff and resources</i> .....	54
5.3.1.2	<i>Sampling</i> .....	54
5.3.1.3	<i>Methods used</i> .....	54
5.3.1.4	<i>Response</i> .....	55
5.3.1.5	<i>Working with the contractor</i> .....	55
5.3.1.6	<i>Comment</i> .....	55
5.3.2	<i>A contracted-out postal survey carried out as part of a consortium</i> .....	55
5.3.2.1	<i>Resources</i> .....	55
5.3.2.2	<i>Sampling</i> .....	55
5.3.2.3	<i>Methods used</i> .....	56
5.3.2.4	<i>Response rate</i> .....	56
5.3.2.5	<i>Working with the contractor</i> .....	56
5.3.2.6	<i>Comment</i> .....	56
5.3.3	<i>An In-house postal survey</i> .....	56
5.3.3.1	<i>Resources</i> .....	56
5.3.3.2	<i>Sampling</i> .....	57
5.3.3.3	<i>Methods</i> .....	57
5.3.3.4	<i>Response rate</i> .....	57
5.3.3.5	<i>DETR guidance</i> .....	57
5.3.3.6	<i>Comment</i> .....	58
5.3.4	<i>An in-house postal survey with data processing contracted out</i> .....	58
5.3.4.1	<i>Resources</i> .....	58
5.3.4.2	<i>Sampling</i> .....	58
5.3.4.3	<i>Methods</i> .....	58
5.3.4.4	<i>Response rate</i> .....	59
5.3.4.5	<i>Comment</i> .....	59
5.4	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	59
<b>6</b>	<b>PLANNING SURVEY.....</b>	<b>60</b>
6.1	DATABASE FINDINGS.....	60
6.1.1	<i>Questions added</i> .....	60
6.1.2	<i>Details of the target population sampled</i> .....	60
6.1.3	<i>Was the survey contracted out?</i> .....	61

6.1.4	<i>Was the confidence interval criterion met?</i> .....	61
6.1.5	<i>Sampling frame</i> .....	61
6.1.6	<i>Sampling method explained</i> .....	61
6.1.7	<i>Were the rules about sampling windows adhered to?</i> .....	61
6.1.8	<i>Were the data weighted?</i> .....	62
6.1.9	<i>How the survey had been carried out</i> .....	62
6.1.10	<i>Response</i> .....	62
6.2	INTERVIEWS WITH AUTHORITIES .....	64
6.2.1	<i>Sampling</i> .....	64
6.2.1.1	Problems caused by the format of records.....	64
6.2.1.2	Applicability of applications and applicants.....	64
6.2.1.3	The effects of sampling agents.....	64
6.2.2	<i>BVPI Questions</i> .....	65
6.3	CASE STUDIES.....	65
6.3.1	<i>A postal survey with a good response, carried out in-house by a single member of staff</i> .....	65
6.3.1.1	Staff and financial resources .....	65
6.3.1.2	Guidance.....	65
6.3.1.3	Enhancing response .....	66
6.3.1.4	Comment .....	66
6.3.2	<i>A postal survey carried out in-house that achieved a poor response rate</i> .....	66
6.3.2.1	Staff and financial resources .....	66
6.3.2.2	Sampling.....	67
6.3.2.3	Response.....	67
6.3.2.4	Guidance.....	67
6.3.2.5	Comment .....	67
6.3.2.6	Recommendations .....	68
<b>7</b>	<b>LIBRARY SURVEYS .....</b>	<b>69</b>
7.1	FINDINGS FROM THE MANAGEMENT DATABASE.....	69
7.1.1	<i>Additional questions</i> .....	69
7.1.2	<i>Details about the target population</i> .....	69
7.1.3	<i>Was the survey contracted out?</i> .....	69
7.1.4	<i>Was the confidence interval criterion met?</i> .....	69
7.1.5	<i>Sampling frame</i> .....	69
7.1.6	<i>Does the sampling method meet the standard?</i> .....	70
7.1.7	<i>Are the sampling windows correct?</i> .....	70
7.1.8	<i>Explanation of the sampling method used</i> .....	70
7.1.9	<i>Were the data weighted?</i> .....	70
7.1.10	<i>Method of questionnaire delivery</i> .....	70
7.1.11	<i>Steps taken to improve response</i> .....	70
7.1.12	<i>Response rates</i> .....	70
7.2	INTERVIEWS WITH AUTHORITIES .....	71
7.2.1	<i>Introduction</i> .....	71
7.2.2	<i>Resources and research expertise</i> .....	71
7.2.3	<i>Guidance</i> .....	72
7.2.4	<i>Sampling</i> .....	72
7.2.5	<i>Response</i> .....	73
7.2.5.1	Dealing with non-response.....	73
7.2.5.2	Enhancing response.....	73
7.2.6	<i>BVPI questions</i> .....	73
7.3	VIEWS OF THE SOCIETY OF CHIEF LIBRARIANS AND CIPFA.....	74
7.3.1	<i>Problems caused by modifications to the PLUS methodology</i> .....	74
7.3.2	<i>BV 118</i> .....	74
7.3.3	<i>Using visitor numbers to calculate the set sample size</i> .....	75
7.3.4	<i>Topic areas</i> .....	75
7.4	CASE STUDY .....	75
7.4.1	<i>Research expertise &amp; Resources</i> .....	75
7.4.2	<i>Budget</i> .....	75
7.4.3	<i>Methods</i> .....	75
7.4.4	<i>Sampling and response</i> .....	76
7.4.5	<i>Response</i> .....	76
7.4.6	<i>The Guidance</i> .....	77

7.4.7	<i>Comment</i> .....	77
7.5	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	77
<b>8</b>	<b>ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF CARRYING OUT THE BV SURVEYS .....</b>	<b>78</b>
8.1	INTRODUCTION .....	78
8.1.1	<i>Conducting the survey(s) centrally</i> .....	78
8.1.2	<i>Sampling</i> .....	78
8.1.3	<i>The BVPI Questions</i> .....	79
8.1.4	<i>The survey mode for a national survey</i> .....	79
8.1.5	<i>Other options</i> .....	80
8.1.5.1	Partial centralisation.....	80
8.1.5.2	Recommendation.....	81
<b>9</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>81</b>
9.1	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	81
9.1.1	<i>Management databases</i> .....	81
9.1.2	<i>All surveys</i> .....	81
9.1.2.1	The guidance .....	81
9.1.2.2	Resources .....	82
9.1.2.3	Probability sampling.....	82
9.1.2.4	Calculating and reporting response.....	83
9.1.2.5	Weighting.....	84
9.1.2.6	Contracting out.....	84
9.1.2.7	Sampling.....	85
9.2	GENERAL SURVEY .....	85
9.2.1	<i>Sampling frames</i> .....	85
9.2.2	<i>Using Panels for surveys</i> .....	85
9.2.3	<i>Questionnaires and question wording</i> .....	86
9.3	PLANNING SURVEY.....	86
9.3.1	<i>Sampling</i> .....	86
9.3.2	<i>Questions and questionnaires</i> .....	87
9.3.2.1	Classification and ethnicity.....	87
9.3.2.2	Joint planning applications .....	87
9.4	TENANTS SURVEY .....	87
9.4.1	<i>Administering the Tenants Survey as part of a structural survey of authority accommodation</i> ... 87	
9.5	BENEFITS SURVEY .....	87
9.5.1	<i>BVPI questions</i> .....	87
9.6	LIBRARIES SURVEY.....	88
9.6.1	<i>Rationalising the needs of IPF, DCMS and DETR</i> .....	88

# Report of the findings of the ONS Best Value Review

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Under the Best Value regime local authorities are placed under a duty to seek continuous improvement in the way in which they exercise their functions. The statutory performance management framework is at the heart of the regime, providing a set of national performance indicators and standards, which were set nationally.

In order to ensure that the best value performance indicators (BVs) give a balanced view of performance, a set of 'quality' indicators were defined to measure the quality of services delivered that explicitly reflected users' experiences of services.

These 'quality' indicators were collected for the first time in 2000/01 through a series of surveys undertaken by local authorities to a standardised methodology set by the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR)<sup>1</sup> and the Department of Health (DOH). Authorities were required to report their indicator results to the Audit Commission together with information on the number of respondents and confidence interval achieved. This report is concerned with the five surveys ('General', 'Tenants', 'Benefits', 'Planning' & 'Library') for which DETR issued guidance.

### 1.2 Data sources & report methodology

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 three different sources of information:

- the 'management databases' set up by ATP<sup>2</sup> 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. These data source has been made use of both in the section on the management databases and in the sections reporting on interviews with local authorities.

SSD also had access to both the 'Yellow Book'<sup>3</sup> and the 'Purple Book'<sup>4</sup>, that is, to written guidance on carrying out the surveys provided for authorities by DETR.

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<sup>1</sup> Departmental responsibility for this work is now with the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister but this report shall refer to the DETR as this is the Department who issued the 2000/01 guidance.

<sup>2</sup> ATP Ltd is an independent company that was contracted to collate and merge the Best Value survey data.

### **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 Authorities' 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

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<sup>3</sup> *Best Value and Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 2000/2001 Volume 1 - User Satisfaction Performance Indicators: Guidance on Methods of Data Collection* available at <http://www.local.DETR.gov.uk/research/bvpi.htm> (accessed July 2002).

<sup>4</sup> *Best Value and Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 2000/01 Volume 1 - The performance Indicators* available at <http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/bvaudit/index.htm> (accessed July 2002).

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?).

### **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 Management databases**

The management databases were analysed using SPSS. Frequency distributions for the sample as a whole were examined in order to identify authorities 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.

Findings from the management databases are reported within the chapter relating to the relevant survey. However, there are also lessons to be learnt from the data held on the database that relate to the way data were specified, collected and recorded. These lessons apply to all the surveys and are therefore discussed in a distinct chapter.

### **2.1 Shortcomings of the management databases**

The management databases suffered from certain shortcomings that will need to be dealt with if they are to maximise their usefulness when BVPI surveys are carried out in the future. The methodological requirements of the survey were set out in the purple book but it was not made clear that in order for the robustness of the surveys to be measured, authorities should report on each of these elements. DETR was therefore faced with the task of collecting this information retrospectively from those authorities who had not provided it. It became apparent that many authorities were unsure of the methodological details of their surveys or struggled to provide all or some of the data for various reasons. It should also be noted that DETR should have defined the data on which authorities were to report more clearly rather than assuming, as it perhaps had done, that those undertaking the surveys would understand the importance of this information and the need to report it.

There are several fields in the database that recorded methodological information about each survey undertaken by each authority. There were however, a number of authorities where the management databases provided no data at all about particular surveys. ATP reported a number of reasons for 'nil returns'. These ranged from not being able to identify within authorities who had custodianship of the survey results, to an unwillingness from authorities to spend the time collating this information, to contractors saying they would charge significant additional fees to provide this information. Significant steps were taken in an

attempt to gain this information but some 'nil returns' had to be accepted. These cases were filtered out.

A further issue relating to the methodological data concerns the clarity of the definitions of the information required. A good example of this is 'response rate'. More than one authority claimed that their response rate to the General Survey was as high as 100% or as low as 0%. Several authorities claimed to have achieved rates of 85% - a figure that seems unlikely for a local authority postal survey. A number of checks were carried out on the databases to find out if outliers or unlikely responses accurately represented the data authorities had returned or were in fact the results of mis-keying. These checks revealed that these were not mis-keys and that the authorities concerned believed that they were accurate response rates. However, without the raw survey data or further information about the authorities' sampling procedures, it is not possible to estimate what the accurate figure should be.

Certain elements of the methodological data were of limited usefulness due to their complexity – for example the data on the steps taken by authorities to improve response. The data would have been easier to analyse had the authorities' actions been coded (by authorities) to a much smaller range of responses. Another feature of the database that needs to be borne in mind and one that is related to the absence of tight definitions mentioned above, is that it presents information about what authorities claimed they did in the course of carrying out the BVPI surveys, not what they actually did.

## **2.2 Recommendations**

If local authorities are to continue to manage and administer the surveys the Department needs to facilitate the acquisition of the data (the 'metadata) required to validate the survey methods used. This means clearly defining the information required and standardising the format in which those data are to be supplied. The Department needs to ensure that methodological data are collected consistently and accurately and that they include the information required to ensure the validity of the data can be checked. For example, when an authority reports a response rate, the data to validate that response rate must also be provided. The Department also needs to consider the processes it needs to put in place to quality-check and validate the survey methodologies and to keep authorities informed about the process of validation.

Additionally the Department should consider whether or not information about the surveys each authority is responsible for should be collected separately for each survey by each authority and if it should, how the information should be collected. In 2001, the Department tried to collate all relevant information about how surveys were carried out within one

database. As a result it was not possible to distinguish between cases where no return has been made because an authority has no responsibility for a function from those where an authority has failed to collect the relevant information. Again, this is an issue of clarifying to authorities what data are required and considering how those data should be collated, analysed and acted upon.

### **3 The General Survey**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The General Survey included questions designed to produce data for the following Best Value Performance Indicators (BVs). The percentage of residents who were very or fairly satisfied with:

- the overall service provided by their Local Authority (BV3);
- the Local Authority's fulfilment of its duty to keep relevant land clear of litter and refuse. (BV89);
- recycling facilities, household waste collection and civic amenity sites (BV90);
- the handling of complaints (this applies to residents who made complaints to their Local Authority) (BV4);
- local provision of transport information (BV103);
- local bus services (BV104); and
- cultural and recreational activities (BV119).

This section reports on the data in the management database and in addition identifies:

- areas where the data seem inconsistent or give rise to concern; and
- aspects of the guidance given to Local Authorities which could be improved and areas where we have concerns about how the surveys were conducted.

#### **3.2 The management information database.**

The management database includes information about sampling, response, weighting and a range of measures that indicate whether or not Local Authorities followed the procedures detailed in the Purple and Yellow Guidance books.

The usefulness of some of the information on the management database is limited because:

- some authorities returned no information;
- some items of data were missing;
- some authorities' returns were internally inconsistent; and
- some authorities' entries were inaccurate or unlikely to be true.

### *3.2.1 Missing information*

Twenty-two authorities failed to return any information at all about the General Survey and indeed may not have completed it. In addition to blank records there are many examples of item non-response. For instance, not all Local Authorities provided details of response rates. Other Local Authorities have claimed response rates that are hard to believe, given the data collection methods used and in other cases response has clearly been miscalculated, resulting in claims of very high response rates. Some Local Authorities that had used contractors to carry out the survey had not required the contractor to provide a technical report and this limited the information they could send to DETR.

A total of four authorities said that they had not provided details of some of the Best Value performance indicators in their returns. Two had not provided details on satisfaction with cleanliness, one on satisfaction with transport information and one on local bus users' satisfaction. It is not clear from the database if information on these indicators has been omitted or if they do not apply to the authorities concerned.

### *3.2.2 Inconsistent information*

Internal inconsistencies were found in the returns made to ATP. The Department therefore needs to consider the level of resources that should be deployed to check the data returned by local authorities.

### *3.2.3 Who carried out the survey*

Ten Authorities did not say whether or not their General Survey had been contracted out. Of the remainder two thirds (65%) used a contractor to carry out the General Survey. London Boroughs (88%) and Metropolitan Authorities (75%) were more likely to use this approach than other types of authority.

### *3.2.4 Selecting the Sample*

Local Authorities were instructed to draw a random sample from a sampling frame that included all residents within their boundaries. The frame recommended in the Purple Book was the Post Office small users address file (PAF). However the Yellow Book guidance also allowed the Electoral Register to be used.

### *3.2.5 The population sampled*

Nearly all Local Authorities (97%) claimed to have returned data that were based on the target population. Eleven Authorities did not provide any information on the target population, but of these three had met the specified standard with respect to random sampling.

### *3.2.6 The Sampling frame used*

Most Local Authorities (77%) followed the approach recommended by the Yellow Book and used the ER as their sampling frame. Larger authorities, Metropolitan Authorities (33%) London Boroughs (36%) and County Councils (26%) were more likely to use the PAF than Unitary Authorities (16%) or District Councils (8%). Seven Local Authorities (2%) said that they used a combination of the PAF and ER but it is not clear from the database how they did this. Interviews with authorities revealed that so-called attainers on the ER were sometimes used to boost the number of young people recruited to a panel and that some had considered cross referencing the ER to the PAF to add names to their mail out of survey forms.

As we have seen, a small proportion of authorities (4%) based their samples on existing panels of residents. The Yellow Book discusses the use of panels and points out that they would only be acceptable as a sampling frame for the General Survey if the members had been recruited using a method that gave an equal probability of selection for each panel member. Interviews with Local Authorities threw further light on this issue.

One authority used its council tax register as a sampling frame. This was surprising since it is illegal to use the list for anything other than administering council tax. In theory all private residences would be liable for council tax and therefore should appear on the register. Local Authorities also clearly have an incentive to ensure that this list, which like the ER has the advantage of providing a named contact at each address, is as up to date as possible. In other words, the council tax register could be a viable sampling frame for Local Authorities. Moreover it would provide details of council tax bands and those addresses with payment reductions or exemptions, which could be used for weighting purposes.

### *3.2.7 Sampling method*

This field in the technical database clarifies the return about the sampled population. Most authorities (97%) appeared to meet the standard.

### *3.2.8 Sample Window*

This field in the management database indicated whether or not fieldwork was completed and data returned within a designated time frame. Well over half (58%) of Local Authorities met the timetable requirement. London Boroughs (24%) were much less likely to do so than Local Authorities as a whole while Metropolitan Authorities (89%) were much more likely to do so. The fact that no less than 88% of London Boroughs used contractors illustrates that their use does not necessarily guarantee that the timetable requirements will be met.

The management database does not record reasons for late returns, but some Local Authorities had expressed concerns in correspondence with DETR about the timetable for the General Survey and reported that they would be making late returns. These Local Authorities

mentioned a number of reasons for the delays. These included difficulties with staffing, budgets and software. From their correspondence with DETR it is also clear that some authorities had not picked up from the purple book the requirement that they send their raw survey data to DETR as well as reporting their BV results to the Audit Commission. Other authorities had not appreciated that the full data file from the surveys was needed by DETR rather than just the aggregated results.

### *3.2.9 Use of Probability samples*

According to the management database, 96% of Authorities used random sampling for the General Survey, 3% carried out censuses and 1% made use of systematic sampling. However, it became clear during interviews with Local Authorities there was some confusion about the use of sampling terminology. Some authorities described their samples as systematic because they had stratified them to reflect local ward age and sex distributions. It was not clear whether or not some of these samples had been achieved using quota samples nor was it clear how they had been reported. Moreover, while at least one authority – a District Council – had definitely carried out a census, the data returned by the remaining nine claiming to have carried out a census do not make it clear whether the census was of a panel or of the total population.

### *3.2.10 Sample size and confidence intervals*

Nearly all Local Authorities (94%) reported their achieved sample size. The proportion claiming to have achieved samples that provided confidence intervals of +/-3% around estimates was slightly lower at 80%. London Boroughs (39%) were half as likely to have met the confidence interval requirement as other types of authority. Method of data collection

According to the management database nearly all (95%) Local Authorities had used postal methods to conduct their surveys. Two authorities (1% of the total), both of which had used contractors, had carried out face-to-face interviews and four per cent of authorities had carried out the survey by telephone.

A few Local Authorities mentioned using personal delivery or collection of self-completion questionnaires but again it was not clear whether this method was used for all questionnaires or as a means of boosting response in areas with poor returns. Two authorities used a telephone follow up for selected residents who had not returned completed questionnaires.

### *3.2.11 Reporting Response*

As well as information about response rates achieved by authorities, the management database included details of methods used to contact respondents and of what had been done to improve response. Reported response rates ranged from 0% to 100% with a mean value of 46%. Minimum rates ranged from 0% - 24% and maximums rated from 9% - 97% (in

practice is would be unusual to find response rates to a largely postal survey of the general public of over 80%). Response rates in London were never higher than 69%.

The Yellow Book provides a straightforward method of working out response rates using an example that deals with 'the number of people in the sample', 'the questionnaires returned' and 'deadwood' (i.e. ineligible addresses). Despite definitions being provided within a glossary of research terms, it is clear that there was still room for misinterpretation. Moreover, the method described does not deal with non-contacts or refusals.

It is clear from discussions with Local Authorities that the response rates they reported were calculated using widely differing assumptions. This makes it difficult to make direct comparisons between them. In some cases the response rate discussed during interviews was not the same as that reported on the management database.

### *3.2.12 In-house and contracted out survey response rates*

According to the management database, surveys conducted in-house achieved a higher average response rate than those contracted out. This was the case for all types of authority. (See Table 1, below) However, there were examples of both good and poor response in both the contracted and in-house groups. The in-house groups achieved a higher minimum response across all authority types and with the exception of the Metropolitan authorities group they also have higher maximum reported response rates.

**Table 1 General Survey: response rates\* by authority type and whether or not the survey had been contracted out**

Authority type	Percentages						
	Contracted out			In-house			All surveys
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Range</i>		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean</i>
County Council	20	43	24-66	11	56	29-81	48
Unitary Authority	29	45	16-66	15	51	25-85	47
Metropolitan Authority	26	47	25-83	9	51	34-79	48
London Borough	29	34	23-46	4	43	29-69	35
District Council	130	46	3-85	81	48	19-97	47

\*excludes reported response rates of 0%

### 3.2.13 Level of response

The level of response achieved by some authorities should be of concern to the Department because low response rates increase the likelihood of bias in the survey results. The Yellow Book describes how to allow for non-response when calculating sample sizes and some Local Authorities clearly anticipated a very low response when working out the number of addresses to sample. The Yellow Book initially suggests a response rate of at least 60% as a target (page 44, last paragraph). Later, (page 46 second paragraph) and in correspondence with Local Authorities, a 50% level was taken as the point below which the results need to be ‘treated with care’. It should be noted that a survey response rate of 50% might still contain bias if the non-respondents are not randomly distributed throughout the sample, and that significant levels of bias are possible with response rates as high as 75%. It may be realistic of authorities to assume a low response rate when calculating sample size but they should be strongly advised to take all possible steps to maximise response and be prepared to detail the steps they have taken in their returns to DETR.

The importance of maximising response was addressed within the guidance, but there needs to be more emphasis on this. The result of lack of focus on response in the guidance, little or

no survey experience among some local authority staff and the requirement that authorities provide confidence intervals and sample sizes in their Best Value Performance Plans (BVPPs), was that many authorities concentrated on achieving a sample of 1,100 respondents, and thereby reaching the required confidence interval, rather than on getting an acceptable response rate. In addition some authorities confused estimating the sample size for the survey using the expected response rate with calculating the sample size, response rate and confidence interval that they actually achieved. Indeed, some authorities did not know what they were supposed to do with the latter figures. This was perhaps a result of the technical nature of the guidance on these issues and illustrates the need for a simpler, modular approach to the guidance for certain users.

### *3.2.14 Enhancing response*

The management database contains information about the methods Local Authorities used to enhance response. Just under a half (47%) of all authorities that carried out postal surveys had sent more than one reminder to respondents. Reminders included both letters and post cards. Over a fifth (23%) of Local Authorities offered a prize draw as an inducement and other gave gifts of shopping vouchers as an incentive. Over a fifth (23%) organised publicity for the survey, including press briefings, slots on local radio and some held local meetings.

The effectiveness of means to enhance the response rates achieved is hard to evaluate, not least because the number of authorities taking some of these steps is small. Where the numbers involved are larger the range of response among authorities is wide. Thus, among authorities sending out more than one reminder, mean response was 49% and the range was 16% - 94%, while among authorities that sent out a single reminder mean response was 43% and the range was 16% - 97%.

However, methods that enhanced response in one authority did not necessarily do so in another. The management database catalogued extensively the different ways in which authorities attempted to boost the response and, as we have already seen, quantitative analysis of these data would have been facilitated by fewer categories. Despite providing an extensive list of methods, the management database does not include a complete account of how the methods were employed. In order to draw conclusions about best practice we need to consider the case study work undertaken. It may be that the successful reminders were better worded than the less successful ones or that they were deployed at a more appropriate point in the survey timetable.

In discussion with Local Authorities it became clear that details not covered in the database might have had an influence on the effectiveness of steps to enhance response. In a postal survey a range of good procedures, including a well-worded covering letter signed by the

Chief Executive, more than one reminder (and a second copy of the questionnaire) and good tracking of response had all been used, and yet response was poor. In discussion it was revealed that a contractor had mailed the reminder letters out with their market research logo on the envelope, with nothing to suggest that it was from the Local Authority. There is evidence to suggest that the public may not even bother to open mail that they view as part of a marketing campaign and this may have contributed to the lack of response.

### *3.2.15 Weighting*

According to the management database just over half (52%) of all Local Authorities and 91% of London Boroughs weighted their data to reflect the age and gender distribution of the population in their area. It is not clear from the management database whether or not other authorities used any other form of weighting. A total of 116 authorities, nearly a third of the total, achieved response rates of 50% or less yet do not appear to have weighted their data to take account of non-response. However, in the course of correspondence and other forms of contact with DETR, some authorities reported that they had looked at the distribution of their sample, considered it an accurate reflection of the local population and had therefore decided that weighting was not required. Unfortunately, without documentation of how weighting was carried out by each authority, an assessment of the quality of the process is not possible.

### *3.2.16 Added questions*

No more than 8% of authorities took advantage of the opportunity offered by DETR to add questions of their own to the General Survey questionnaire. Apart from the fact that none of the London Boroughs reported adding questions, there were no differences between authorities with respect to the proportions that had and had not added questions.

## **3.3 Interviews with Local Authorities**

In the second part of the review of the General Survey SSD approached a range of authorities and discussed their experiences of conducting the survey. Interviews were carried out either face-to-face or by telephone. Where these existed, authorities sent us copies of their technical reports on the survey.

### *3.3.1 Resources*

Many Authorities had difficulty in securing an adequate budget to carry out the BVPI satisfaction surveys. They needed either sufficient staff and funding to carry out the work themselves or staff time to manage the process if the work was contracted out. It was apparent that for some Authorities the limit on resources compromised the quality of the work they were able to carry out, for example by limiting the number of reminders they could afford to mail out.

Local Authorities did, of course, receive resources that were intended to cover the costs of carrying out the BVPI surveys, however it seems that few had designated any part of this funding specifically for surveys. So although Authorities received money for BVPI monitoring, the survey element was not specified separately and money for it was not ring-fenced.

Authorities had to contain the cost of running the surveys within existing budgets or use funding that was intended for other projects. Some Authorities had to make a case to their elected politicians for special funding to carry out the survey. They had to explain that the survey was a DETR requirement, convince local politicians of the value of the project and convince them also that the methodology used should be that specified by DETR. Staff in Authorities that had already established a consultation process with their residents using panel surveys could find it very difficult to explain why they needed more resources specifically to implement the methodology required by DETR.

Some authorities had established a dedicated research or corporate development unit to carry out all work associated with the BVPI requirements, and many of these units were already carrying out regular consultation with their residents. Where this core of experience existed the BVPI surveys were more easily accommodated. At the other extreme were authorities trying to handle the survey in-house, using existing staff, often with little or no research experience, and facing a very steep learning curve. Many authorities did not realise the level of staff resources that would be needed to run the survey.

The number of staff required to carry out the BVPI surveys in-house varied across authorities. A larger authority with a developed in-house capability had at least two or three staff most of whose time was dedicated to survey type of work. Once they had completed an established programme of survey research such an authority with a dedicated research unit could employ staff with research experience and could develop research skills in others. This particular authority had an existing programme of consultation using surveys based on a panel and on focus groups. The BVPI requirements were added to this process. Even larger authorities found it necessary to use staff from other areas or employ temporary staff to cover labour intensive tasks such as preparing the mail out of questionnaires, data entry, checking and editing. A few authorities had larger corporate planning or BVPI units with eight or more staff, but these usually had responsibility for a wider range of functions.

Small authorities did not have access to this level of resource and contracted out the work of setting up and running the survey, sometimes as part of a consortium with other local authorities, including their local County Council. This approach had two main advantages: it allowed smaller authorities to draw on the experience of others and it reduced costs for each

consortium member. One estimate of the resource required for a member of a consortium (not taking the lead in negotiating the contract or monitoring the process) was at least 20% of one full time member of staff, with some relevant experience, and additional administrative input amounting to two person-weeks. Obviously the authority taking the lead role in a consortium would need to make more resources available, but in some cases this would be a larger authority with an established research or corporate planning unit that could dedicate experienced staff to running the project.

Where an authority contracted out the work on its own, it had to manage the project and ideally be in regular contact with the contractor. The amount of staff input required varied according to how much of the process was carried out by the contractor (the contract might not include the analysis and preparation of the DETR data return) and whether or not the contractor encountered problems.

### 3.3.2 *Contracting out*

There were a number of reasons why Local Authorities contracted out all or part of the work of setting up and running the General Survey to market research firms:

- they did not have the necessary skills to do the work in-house;
- they had the skills but did not have enough staff resources to carry out a survey of this size and type;
- they considered the amount of time in which the survey had to be completed to be too short for them to do the work in-house;
- they could join other Local Authorities in a consortium; or
- they had decided to use face-to-face interviewing.

In some cases authorities had the skills to design and carry out the research element of the work but contracted out the more labour intensive or specialised processes, such as mailing out questionnaires and data entry. If an authority decided to use face-to-face interviewing then this would require them at least to contract out the interviewing.

There were examples where contracting out had been accomplished very successfully, with the authority reporting a good working relationship with the contractor. However this was not a universal experience and some Local Authorities reported real difficulties.

In order for their relationship with a contractor to work well Local Authority staff needed to have enough knowledge (or else very explicit guidance) to define the task for their contractor and then to be able to monitor how the company carried out the work. Some authorities relied too heavily on the DETR guidance to specify how the survey should be carried out, in some

cases handing over the Yellow or Purple books and asking the company to follow the laid down procedures. In the main contractors probably did what they were asked, but there were examples where authorities did not know how sampling, the administration of the survey (for example, the type and timing of reminder letters) or other elements of the survey process had been handled, nor did they know how response rates had been calculated.

Local Authorities did not always get a technical report from their contractors. Some authorities mentioned that they had had to request one or insist on one being provided. Even then, some technical reports did not give the detail necessary to assess how the company had handled the survey. Some authorities did not commission a technical report and simply relied on their contractor fulfilling the DETR requirements. Some authorities simply relied on the professional competence of the contractor.

A common theme in successful examples of contracting out the survey was regular contact between the contractor and Local Authority staff. This could take the form of progress reports scheduled as part of the survey timetable (the larger nationally known companies tended to offer this approach). Authorities using smaller companies described the process as a collaboration or partnership. Here the level of contact could be on a daily basis, with the company reviewing progress and agreeing the next steps with their Local Authority contact. Running the project as a partnership required Local Authorities to allocate staff to manage the project and to provide regular contact with the contractor.

### 3.3.3 *Sampling*

Local Authorities were required to use random sampling for their satisfaction surveys. This meant that all elements in the sampling frames they used, be they households or individuals, had to have an equal and known chance of being selected for the survey. It is clear that many authorities are much more familiar with quota sampling techniques and do not understand random sampling. Some authorities argued that quota samples were more representative because they ensured that the achieved sample contained the correct proportions of different types of local residents and could also ensure a geographical distribution of respondents over an authority's geographical areas. When asked if they had stratified their samples in order to ensure that all geographical areas were covered, some authorities made it clear that they thought this was against the rules as it would 'not be a random sample'. They did not realise that areas could be over-sampled (and the results reweighted for the BVPI returns) to allow local areas analysis.

*'The under-representation of ... ethnic respondents highlights another flaw in the DETR survey specifications. The survey was conducted as a purely random sample survey. Quota sampling to ensure representativeness was specifically disallowed.'*

Many authorities do not realise that quotas samples, while appearing to be representative, will be prone to non-response bias.

The DETR guidance (primarily the Yellow Book) gives some justification for using random samples, but it is written in a rather academic style. Local Authorities are much more familiar with research based on quota samples and are used to working with contractors for whom this is the normal and preferred method. Some Local Authorities mentioned that their contractors had advised them that quota samples were or should be acceptable for the General Survey.

Local Authority staff not only need to understand why random samples are being required but need to be able to convince their local councillors when requesting funding for the work. While some councillors were prepared to accept the DETR requirement others were not easily convinced and questioned the need to use additional resources to undertake a survey based on a random sample. This was particularly the case with some authorities that had already established a panel survey based on quota samples.

#### *3.3.4 Using residents panels as the sample for the General Survey*

Authorities that had set up residents' panels, understandably, tried to make sure all their areas were represented. Often they wanted to ensure that specific age groups or ethnic groups were included in sufficient numbers and this could lead to the size of these groups being boosted. This was not always done by over-sampling using a known sampling fraction, that is, in a way that could be allowed for by reweighting when the panel was used for the General Survey.

Panels suffer attrition as people drop out and this means that replacements are required. Replacement could be carried out using a reserve list of people from the original recruitment exercise. In practice, some authorities chose the replacements purposively rather than at random from subgroups with similar characteristics to the respondents who had dropped out. Other authorities recruited more people 'along the way' by including invitations to volunteer in Newsletters sent to local residents.

Another disadvantage of panels is that they can be asked to undertake a number of consultation exercises and thus become very familiar with the process and much more involved in and knowledgeable about the issues being discussed than other local residents. This is often referred to as conditioning. To avoid it panel members should be replaced at regular intervals. The effect of conditioning on a panel that had been in operation for some time to carry out the General Survey could lead to biased results.

One authority set up a new panel using random sampling and used it for the first time for the General Survey. They planned to replace their panel every three years to match the DETR timetable.

Recruiting residents to serve on a panel is asking for a higher level of commitment from them compared with asking them to take part in one survey. Panel recruitment usually suffers from low response. This means that even if the sample is stratified with respect to age, sex and the geographical location of its members, there is still the possibility that result from a survey of panel members will be biased. To put this another way: people willing to be consulted on a range of issues over several years may have different views from those prepared to spare the time to complete only one survey.

If a panel is used as the sample for the General Survey then the initial recruitment response should be included in the calculation of the survey response rate. This effect of this would be dramatically to reduce the response rate to the survey. Not all authorities using panel were aware of the need to take account of response at the recruitment stage. In one example, the response to the panel recruitment was about 11%. For the General Survey 82% of the panel responded 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 8%.

Using a panel as the sample for the General Survey has drawbacks, but it has to be recognised that once set up a panel gives Local Authorities a resource that can be re-used. One option might be for Local Authorities to select a large random sample of their residents to carry out the General Survey and then use the same sample to recruit a smaller random sub-sample of members for a panel. There would be cost implications if the General Survey questionnaire were to be sent to the total sample that would have to be approached in order to recruit sufficient panel members, but it could, of course, be sent to a subset of the total sample.

### *3.3.5 Response*

Some of the authorities we talked with thought that the target response level suggested by the guidance was unrealistic and that a 50% or 60% response rate was not feasible using postal methods. Authorities often claimed that this viewpoint was supported by the contractors they had used to carry out the survey. However, some authorities did achieve the target response rate but demonstrated that to do so they needed to apply sound methodology and sufficient resources. Local Authorities contacted the Department to discuss response problems and to review the steps they had taken and this should be encouraged.

Some authorities did not see response as a priority and simply accepted that it would be low. In some of these cases the emphasis was on achieving enough cases to meet the confidence interval requirement. On occasion, the response rate discussed with us did not correspond to the rate on the management database. In some cases Authorities had contracted out the survey to a market research company and did not always have full information about how response rates had been calculated. In other cases calculation of the response rate had not

taken ineligible addresses or households into account. In one authority where the survey had been contracted out, the contractor was given a sample of 3,000 named persons from the Electoral Register and was to approach each in turn until 1,100 interviews had been completed. Because the contractor had achieved the target of 1,100 interviews the authority claimed that the response rate for the General Survey was 100% and ignored the question of what proportion of those who had been invited or approached to take part in the survey had refused or not been contacted in person. The response rate they had achieved was based not on the sample drawn for the survey but on the target number needed to meet the confidence interval required. Confusion between response rates and the number of interviews required to meet DETR's confidence interval requirement is illustrated by the following:

*'... 12,000 households were sent a postal questionnaire, 3,044 were returned - DETR required that surveys obtain a response level of 1,050.'*

The authority quoted had correctly calculated that their response rate was 25 %, but the DETR target response rate was 50% or 60% (depending which part of the Yellow book guidance was followed). The 'response level' referred to above was the number of cases needed to reach the required confidence interval.

Clearly not all authorities were able to calculate an accurate response rate either because they did not have the relevant information or because they were confused about how to do the calculation.

### 3.3.6 *Weighting*

How and why data should be weighted probably caused more confusion than any other area in the guidance. Many authorities did not consider weighting their data to compensate for non-response and few had used sampling designs that required their data to be differentially weighted to take account of the over-sampling of selected groups of residents. Authorities that normally used quota samples mentioned that they had no experience in weighting data. Evidently some contractors also found weighting difficult. However, there were examples of authorities using weighting to allow for non-response and while some of these relied on their contractor's expertise to carry out the calculations, others had successfully followed the Guidance.

It was apparent from discussions with Local Authorities that some of them needed help in weighting their data. Many authorities told us that they found the section about weighting in the Guidance difficult to follow and this view was also reflected in the correspondence between authorities and DETR

### 3.3.7 *The Guidance (Yellow and Purple Books)*

Local Authority staff with some research skills were able to use the guidance for reference and were often complimentary about it, citing in particular its comprehensiveness. For those with less experience its size, style and content could be daunting

*'We used it to inform our specification. It covered most things but if I had been doing the survey on my own I would have struggled...there were a lot of technical things that required a lot of work to understand'.*

Others in the group with less experience commented that the Guidance was '*not forceful enough*', that is it was not always clear what was an absolute requirement and what was not. So, for example, whether or not panel surveys could be used was buried in what was seen by some authorities as a discussion paper on the merits of different sampling methods.

Authorities suggested that the section on weighting should include more detail about how to carry it out. It was also evident that the section on response needed to include clear definitions of what was meant by full or partial co-operation, non-contact, refusal and ineligible case, as well as a standard method for calculating and reporting response.

Some authorities considered that the target response rate of 50% for a postal survey was beyond anything they or their contractors considered attainable and were therefore dismissive of the guidance. Achieving the target response rate will be very difficult in some authorities, and this should be acknowledged by DETR, but other authorities have met or exceeded the DETR target. It is therefore clear that while the target was not unrealistic, more guidance and support will be required for those authorities that need to increase their response rates.

In correspondence with authorities that were having problems achieving an adequate level of response, DETR took a pragmatic approach and accepted that what they needed was evidence that an Authority had taken all reasonable steps to get reach the target response rate. The Guidance should emphasise that this is what is expected of all authorities that have failed to reach the target.

Another key issue relating to the written guidance, raised by some but not all authorities, was that the Yellow book reached them too late. Some authorities also mentioned apparent inconsistencies between the Yellow Book guidance and the guidance in the purple book.

Authorities made a number of suggestions about how to improve the guidance including:

- combining the two guidance books into one;
- making the guidance more prescriptive in tone and less of a discussion document;
- standardising the procedures (possibly using templates with macros) for sampling, and calculating response rates, confidence intervals, and weights.

### 3.3.8 *The BVPI questions*

There was a mixture of views about the BVPI questions. Some authorities simply accepted them and used them as they stood. Others were more critical. They felt that the wording of the questions was strange and the requirement that if local terms were used they should be added in brackets resulted in very clumsy questions.

*'It seemed unnecessarily prescriptive to me...if we say we have a theatre and name that theatre in the question ...it doesn't seem like something that would materially affect the comparison between different authorities'*

Authorities thought the number of questions on waste disposal excessive and that it made the interview unbalanced. Some authorities were very clear that a survey that started with several questions about waste collection with terminology such as '*the receptacle provided for your household waste*' would not be of interest to their local residents.

We received other, similar, comments:

*'Why are we asking about the opening times of recycling centre? These are not the biggest issues.'*

Some authorities argued that the BVPI questions did not reflect local concerns and that this made the questionnaire less interesting to their residents than it could have been. In part this is a result of authorities choosing not to add questions of their own to the General Survey, sometimes because they already had research in process which they were unable to co-ordinate with the General Survey timetable. For some authorities the survey was run too late in the year to fit their requirements for planning information.

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.

*'The decline of the response rate [compared with the level the Authority achieves with its own surveys] is most likely due to the poorly designed questionnaire specified by the DETR). Contrary to best practice, the questions were lengthy and phrased in a legalistic jargon that must have been off-putting for most recipients'.*

The requirement to ask questions about facilities such as theatres was sometimes misunderstood. Some authorities asked the questions individually for each facility they provided. While this would be a viable strategy for authorities that provided a few facilities, it resulted in a lengthy interview when there were many to consider. There was also confusion about whether all BVPI questions had to be asked and what the rules were if an authority shared responsibility for providing a service. In cases where the authority had no managerial control or only contributed limited funding they were often uncertain about what they should do. Some authorities not only found the Guidance unclear on this particular issue but also misunderstood the advice they received about it from DETR.

Many authorities argued that the rule that allowed additional questions to be added only before or after the BVPI questions made the flow of questions look odd. It could mean respondents having to return to topics already raised in the BVPI block. Some authorities modified BVPI questions to make their meaning clear to their local residents and interspersed their own questions within BVPI modules in order to keep like topics together. The views of contractors were often used as justification for not following the DETR guidance.

The authorities interviewed - one of which had received complaints about the inclusion of the ethnicity question - remarked on item non-response in the classification section.

### *3.3.9 Contact with DETR*

Authorities views about their contacts with DETR were mixed. The most frequent complaint was that the Department was clearly understaffed and needed to put more resources into the BVPI helpline and needed also to turn round Email queries more quickly.

Authorities also commented that they did not always get consistent answers if they sought advice from different people at DETR. They mentioned getting inconsistent advice about the use of panels and whether or not BVPI questions could be omitted if an authority had no responsibility for managing or funding a service.

Sometimes Authorities reported that when they contacted the DETR helpline, the contact was unable or unwilling to give a definitive answer to their queries and referred them back to the guidance. It should be noted, however, that most Authorities were generally appreciative of their contacts with DETR staff and accepted that both they and the Department were going through the survey process for the first time.

However, in future the Department should consider devoting more resources to handling queries from authorities and to ensuring that the advice is comprehensive and consistent.

### *3.3.10 Differing attitudes to the General Survey*

Criticism of the BVPI General Survey tended to come from authorities that already had an established programme of consultation with local residents. Other authorities, while sometimes voicing concerns about the way questions were worded or describing problems they had experienced with the guidance, had used the DETR exercise as a means of starting a consultation process. There were authorities that had used the General Survey results in their planning and had fed them into workshops with local managers in order to improve the services they provided. In some of these cases, the methods used by the authority to carry out the General Survey were flawed and response rate was poor. However, if the intention of the BVPI exercise is not just to compare authorities' performance but also to encourage a process of consultation between local authorities with their residents, then it has had positive outcomes that may not be apparent from between authority comparisons.

Many of the more negative comments we received reflect a lack of ownership by local authorities of the BVPI topic areas and questions.

*'...the [local] politicians still felt that they had to do it rather than really buying into it'*

It was clear that while many authorities did 'buy into' the DETR requirements, others saw the exercise as imposed on them and did enough to meet the requirements and no more.

In one example an authority, while using good methodology in setting up their postal questionnaire, did not make any attempt to enhance response by following up non-responders. When asked why, they replied:

*'It's not our questionnaire. We haven't been given any opportunity to influence ...the questionnaire content'*

While it may be impossible to achieve 'buy in' by all authorities, DETR might consider taking steps to emphasise the importance and value of the surveys that could help win over some of the doubters. These steps could include allowing local authorities more flexibility (within the need for consistent methodology and comparable questions), providing more resources to support the survey process and promoting the analysis and use of the data by authorities.

### *3.3.11 Timing*

Some authorities reported that they had already asked similar questions to those in the General Survey earlier in the same year in order to inform their own planning process. They argued that if the BVPI questions could have been incorporated into *their* timetable, this would have increased their usefulness to the authorities.

## **3.4 General Survey case studies**

The Local Authorities whose staff were interviewed had used a number of different strategies to carry out the General Survey. Some of these are summarised below. In some cases the experience was not as successful as the authorities had hoped, but the lessons they learnt may be valuable to others.

### *3.4.1 The consortium approach: the view of a lead authority*

The authority took the lead in a group of ten that worked together as a consortium for all the user satisfaction surveys. This approach was adopted:

- to reduce the cost of carrying out the survey;
- to limit the workload (the lead authority had a team that could have carried out the work for their authority, but it would have been 'a stretch'); and
- because it offered them the opportunity to benchmark their results with other, neighbouring authorities before national results were made available.

#### *3.4.1.1 Resources*

The survey cost the lead member £12,000. A steering group was set up consisting of four or five people, drawn from the other local authorities plus representatives from the contractor's company. The lead authority provided a project manager and handled contact with DETR. All the people involved had had research experience.

#### *3.4.1.2 Contracting out*

The work of running the survey was given, following competitive tendering, to a local market research agency. The consortium had experience in drawing up Invitations to Tender (ITTs) and contracts and had used their own template for specifying the work to be carried out. However, they did look at the DETR guidance about contracting out surveys and thought it was comprehensive.

The selected company was one that the lead authority had worked with before. The consortium adopted a collaborative approach, involving regular meetings with the contractor, which enabled it to check that the DETR guidance was being followed, and to ensure that the work kept to timetable. Progress was checked by means of weekly updates from the contractor.

The contractor presented results from the survey in SPSS for members of the consortium that did not have the relevant software or experience of data analysis.

#### *3.4.1.3 Timing*

This consortium thought the timetable was realistic, as it fitted with other work they were intending to do for their own planning purposes. They were also doing a range of other projects but while they were very busy at that time of year, they had enough resources to cope. The survey started on time and draft results were produced according to the DETR timetable.

From commissioning to the production of a final report took 4 ½ months.

#### *3.4.1.4 Sampling*

The PAF was chosen as the sampling frame as this was easier for the contractor to use than the electoral register which the consortium members would have had to supply on disc.

#### *3.4.1.5 Comment*

A key features of this example is the close contact between a consortium with research experience and the contractor.

### *3.4.2 The consortium approach: the view of a consortium member*

#### *3.4.2.1 Resources*

This authority had a budget of £8,500 to carry out the survey. One person from each authority acted as a link with the consortium and the lead authority, which was the County Council, worked directly with the contractor. The authority was aware that being a member of the consortium saved them a lot of time and money, with their staff involvement limited to part of a full-time staff member with some research experience and two weeks administrative input from a student. Nevertheless, the authority contributed to drawing up the specification for the contractor (based on the Yellow book guidance).

#### *3.4.2.2 Sample and Method*

The sampling frame used by this consortium was the electoral register with the contractor advising each consortium member how to draw a sample of respondents for their own area. The questionnaire was administered by post. The survey covered the full range of BVPI questions and included those that were not applicable to consortium members apart from the County Council. This was made clear to respondents. The smaller authorities simply ignored answers to these questions when they made their data returns to DETR. In this way the consortium got round the problem of how to define which questions were relevant to different authorities.

#### *3.4.2.3 Monitoring progress*

This authority did not commission a technical report but had regular progress reports from the contractor that included details of the number of reminders sent out and the response rates achieved.

#### *3.4.2.4 Comment*

The authority considered that being a member of the consortium was very cost effective and gave them a better result in terms of data quality and response than they would have achieved by themselves.

### *3.4.3 The In-house approach*

#### *3.4.3.1 A new Unitary authority that made the most of the opportunity to carry out the General Survey*

When this Unitary authority was created from a number of existing District Councils staff put forward a case for setting up a corporate research unit to carry out consultation exercises. The staff had had to convince their councillors of the merits of this approach to consultation. They succeeded partly because there was a perceived need for the new authority to consult across the boundaries of the old Districts and to have a means to publicise the results of the

consultation as an output from the new authority. Their councillors now find it helpful to have unbiased research about residents' views when making decisions.

Initially the unit worked with another authority that had an established methodology for consulting residents. They now run their own operation and believe that they have added to the methodology of consultation.

#### *3.4.3.2 Methodology*

The authority has a residents' panel recruited using random sampling and stratified to ensure that it is representative of all its constituent areas. Details of the panel members are stored on a respondent database. This enables the number of times each panel member has been consulted and the topics they have covered to be monitored. The authority plans to renew the panel every three years so they have new respondents for forthcoming General Surveys. The database also contains a list of people that can be sampled in order to replace panel members who move away or no longer wish to take part. The corporate research unit tries to match the to send out questionnaires and, record response and generate reminders.

The unit uses a sophisticated survey design package that produces questionnaires and interview schedules that can be read using OCR (optical character recognition) software. This enables them to design, field and process surveys quickly, with a high degree of automation, and feed the OCR-read data into an analysis package. While this means that the unit cost for running one of their consultation surveys is now no more than about £5,000, the authority did stress that they were enjoying the benefits of earlier investment in equipment, software and, crucially, staff training.

Analysis is carried out using SPSS and the results fed into a publishing package that allows the unit to produce a very professional newsletter. The unit is now seen as a resource that can help other public bodies, such as local health trusts, by running surveys on their behalf.

The unit operates with three staff whose primary role is running their consultation surveys, although other corporate planning tasks are also covered by the team. This core of staff is supplemented by casual staff (usually students) who help with operations such as feeding schedules through the OCR process and resolving any data queries. To operate specialised software does require the unit to maintain its skills base and it has had to argue a case for maintaining its staffing level.

The unit is now considering ways of using the internet to consult with members of their panel.

#### *3.4.3.3 Comment*

The combination of an experienced research team, and investment in technology and training made this a successful operation. However, buying the equipment, getting it to work

effectively and training staff was a lengthy process. Staff estimated that it took nearly three years to reach their current level of proficiency. It is a viable model for larger authorities and offers the prospect of a resource other smaller authorities could buy into individually or as part of a consortium.

#### *3.4.4 Carrying out the survey in-house with some operations bought in.*

This authority has a research team of three staff, all with survey experience. They undertook most of the General Survey in-house because they had both the resources and the necessary experience. Questionnaire design, sampling, analysis and weighting were all carried out by their own staff. However, some labour intensive and specialised roles were contracted out; they used contractors to handle stuffing the questionnaires into envelopes and to key in the data from the returned questionnaires. The team used the SNAP package for data analysis.

#### *3.4.5 Contracting-out independently*

Some authorities set up a contract to run their General Survey independently, not as a member of a consortium, and did this very successfully. Two common themes, where this process had worked well, were that there was good communication between the authorities' research staff and the contractor and the authorities' staff had experience of both the contracting process and with large-scale survey research. However some authorities reported difficulties.

##### *3.4.5.1 Face-to-face interviewing*

The authority had decided to use face-to-face interviews for their General Survey because they were concerned about data quality, and because they thought that this method was the only one that would achieve a response rate of over 50%.

##### *3.4.5.2 Resources*

They initially planned to spend £50,000 on the survey but their resources were cut back. This constrained the number of additional questions they could afford to ask and reduced their choice of contractors to two.

##### *3.4.5.3 Methods*

The authority's research staff drew the sample and set up a detailed methodology for the contractor to follow, including the calling pattern to be adopted for the interviewing and a requirement for regular progress reports. In retrospect the authority's staff considered that the contractor:

- was constrained by the tight budget;
- had underestimated the task to be carried out;
- had promised a field force of local interviewers that they did not in fact have;

- did not follow the agreed calling pattern at addresses;
- failed to keep appointments, which led to complaints from respondents,
- and did not keep the authority informed about progress.

#### *3.4.5.4 Comment*

The lesson that the authority learned was that not all contractors are used to dealing with a random sample and they may, therefore, underestimate the time and resources needed to achieve an adequate response rate with such a sample. Although the authority did get sufficient interviews to meet the required confidence interval for the survey it did not have information about how the sample was handled by the contractor or what had happened at each address to accurately calculate response.

#### *3.4.6 General Survey: Conclusions and Recommendations*

The case studies illustrate the diversity of experience and approaches to conducting the General Survey and provide a range of good practice examples. It is not possible to hold up a single example as an ideal approach as circumstances within authorities vary so much. The key issue for DETR is to encourage authorities to build on the lessons they and other authorities have learnt from undertaking the survey in 2000/01. This can be done through the guidance and also by promoting the benefits of the surveys to authorities in terms of the analysis and use of the data.

The recommendations concerning the management databases made in Chapter 2 are given more weight by the findings from the General Survey database information. It is clear not only that the Department needs to collect the information but that it needs to facilitate further that collection, perhaps through the provision of templates.

The issue of resources is one that emerges clearly from this review in a number of ways. First it is clear that many authorities underestimated the financial and resource implications of the survey. The Department should use consultation documents to emphasise the need for dedicated appropriate resources for this work, whether the work is undertaken in-house or contracted out. Consideration should also be given to producing a template document which makes it clear that authorities are required by DETR to carry out the General Survey and makes clear also DETR's requirements in terms of the survey methodology, so that a case can easily be put forward by authority staff bidding for resources. This document will need to be written in non-technical language.

The issue of why random probability samples should be used and not quota samples needs to be addressed explicitly in a separate document. There also needs to be further guidance and support on how simple random samples can be improved by the use of stratification, as well as on boosting samples, weighting results and other technical aspects of the survey.

The diversity of authorities' experience of contractors suggests that procurement and project management advice needs to be developed. As with the other guidance, this may not be necessary for all authorities but should be available for those who need it. It might even be a useful reference document for those with considerable experience of letting tenders and working with contractors. The provision of templates for the submission of metadata will also facilitate the management of contracted surveys.

Guidance on the use of panels needs to be expanded. The Department should continue to allow authorities that have established panels, recruited using random sampling, based on the Best Value survey cycle to continue to make use of them for the General Survey. However, authorities wanting to use residents' panels samples for the General Survey should first be required to obtain the Department's agreement. The Department will need to verify that the panels are acceptable sampling frames. Panels recruited using random sampling should be allowed provided the populations from which they were recruited were fully representative of the target populations and provided also that appropriate steps had been taken to deal with panel attrition. Authorities need to be encouraged to deal appropriately with conditioning among panel members.

The Department needs to give careful consideration to the issue of weighting, not just in terms of providing written guidance but also in terms of the support it provides to authorities in undertaking this task and in recording details of the weighting process. One approach which could be considered is setting up templates which would prescribe the method to be used in weighting, calculate weights and at the same time document the data used in the process.

Although the guidance was a useful reference document, particularly for those with research experience, the Department needs to revise it so that it takes account of the experiences of authority staff undertaking the surveys. This will mean making the guidance more prescriptive and making clearer the distinction between what the Department requires authorities to do in the course of setting up and running the surveys and what is just guidance. More resources are also required to support this guidance and to ensure that all advice and support provided is consistent throughout all forms of communication between the Department and the authorities. However clear and well written guidance is, there will always be a need for support because there will always be the possibility of the guidance being misinterpreted. In addition, even well qualified and experienced survey researchers will on occasion benefit from talking through various aspects of the survey process.

Authorities were particularly keen to use standard templates. This would therefore seem a sensible way to ensure that the required methods of data collection are followed and that data are collected and submitted in the required standard format.

Some authorities were particularly concerned about the appropriateness and the wording of questions about waste, and others were not happy with the Department's rules concerning the use of local terms, but apart from these there were no major or consistent messages about the actual questions in the General Survey. The Department should consider allowing authorities greater flexibility in question wording and the placing of additional questions within the BVPI modules in order to meet local needs, but should insist that such variations be agreed first with DETR.

Finally it is clear that, while a consistent methodology is required if there are to be meaningful comparisons between authorities, the Department should consider ways in which it can encourage 'buy in' to the surveys. These could include agreeing requests from authorities for more flexibility where appropriate (for example the use of the words 'tip' or 'container site' rather than 'civic amenity site' but not lengthy lists of the services and amenities they provide), providing more support and promoting the benefits of the survey for uses beyond the reporting requirements for Best Value.

## **4 Tenants Survey**

### **4.1 Results from the Management Database**

In total, 235 authorities provided data about their Tenants' Survey.

#### *4.1.1 Added questions*

Only two authorities, both District Councils, added questions of their own to the Tenants' Survey questionnaire but as the majority of authorities collected the BV data as part of the STATUS questionnaire, the data collected by most authorities went beyond the requirements for Best Value.

#### *4.1.2 Target population*

Six per cent of authorities – 14 in total – provided no information about the target population for their Tenants' Survey. Thirteen of the 14 authorities were District Councils.

#### *4.1.3 Was the survey contracted out?*

Just over a quarter of authorities (27%) contracted out the Tenants Survey. London Boroughs and Metropolitan Authorities were half as likely again to have contracted out their surveys (40% and 39% respectively).

#### *4.1.4 Was the confidence interval criterion met?*

Seventeen per cent of authorities did not meet the confidence interval criterion. The proportion that failed varied according to authority type. Thus three per cent of Metropolitan

Authorities and eight per cent of London Boroughs failed to meet the criterion compared with 14% of Unitary Authorities and 22% of District Councils.

#### *4.1.5 Sampling frame*

Six per cent of authorities – 12 District Councils and two Unitary Authorities – provided no details about the sampling frame they used. According to the Management Database, the remainder used their Tenants list. Despite what was reported on the Database, at least one authority used the Joint Information System Gazetteer.

#### *4.1.6 Sampling methods meets the standard*

In 11% of cases authorities' sampling methodology did not meet the standards laid down by DETR. The proportion of authorities not meeting the standard did not vary markedly by authority type.

#### *4.1.7 Were the sampling window rules adhered to?*

Nine per cent of authorities failed to adhere to DETR's rules about sampling windows. The proportions of Metropolitan Authorities, Unitary Authorities and London Boroughs that had failed to adhere to the rules were lower than average (7%, 5% and 4%), while among District Councils it was higher than average (12%).

#### *4.1.8 Type of survey*

Five per cent of authorities did not give details of the kind of survey they had carried out. Of the remainder, 70% per cent said they had carried out a sample survey and 30% had carried out a census of tenants. The proportion of London Boroughs that carried out a sample survey was higher than the average across all authorities (88% compared with 70%). District Councils were more likely to have carried out a census (35% compared with 30%).

#### *4.1.9 Were the data weighted?*

Sixteen per cent of authorities weighted the data from the Tenants' Survey. Metropolitan Authorities were twice as likely as all authorities to weight their data (32%), Unitary Authorities were slightly more likely (22%) and District Councils slightly less likely (11%).

#### *4.1.10 Questionnaire delivery*

Thirteen authorities did not say how they had carried out their Tenants' Survey. Of the remainder, 94% had used a postal questionnaire and 5% had carried out face-to-face interviews. Two authorities had undertaken a telephone survey.

#### 4.1.11 Response rates

Fifteen authorities - six per cent of the total - did not provide details about response rates. Among the remainder, the mean reported response rate was 47%. Response rates did not differ a great deal according to authority type.

**Table 2 Tenants Survey: response rates\* by authority type and whether or not the survey had been contracted out**

Authority type	Percentages						
	Contracted out			In-house		All surveys	
	Mean	Range	N	Mean	Range	Mean	
County Council	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
Unitary Authority	8	49	32-73	28	44	1-90	45
Metropolitan Authority	11	52	36-72	19	49	9-98	50
London Borough	10	44	21-95	15	46	8-99	45
District Council	33	45	20-72	95	47	4-93	47

\*excludes reported response rates of 0%

## 4.2 Interviews with local authorities

### 4.2.1 Sampling

#### 4.2.1.1 The sampling frame

Most authorities used their own list of council tenants to draw a sample as this was readily available and had the advantage of allowing the survey to be addressed to a named tenant. Authorities were confident that their lists were kept up to date often with monthly revisions. Authorities varied in their views about the extent of sub-letting, (this would mean that the name on the council list was not the occupant of the property). Most thought that there was only a small proportion of properties that may have been sublet, and that this would be restricted to known estates or blocks of flats.

At least one authority had used a different sampling frame - the Joint Information System Gazetteer. This was described as a complete list of all properties in their area including information about tenure, which meant that the list could be used to identify council properties. The authority said that this address frame was kept up to date and that they had used it as it was easier to devise a computer program to extract the sample from this list than

their own council tenant's list. However, the Gazetteer had the disadvantage that the name of the tenant was not listed so the survey had to be addressed to 'the occupier'.

Another authority had already conducted a large consultation exercise with its tenants and used this sample to carry out the BVPI survey. The original sample was drawn using random probability methods. However the BVPI follow up included only those who had agreed to take part in a further survey. The authority added extra, purposively chosen, addresses to boost the numbers of respondents from ethnic minorities. This had not been taken into account when the results were reported or the response rate was calculated.

#### *4.2.1.2 Sample or Census*

Some authorities decided to conduct a census of all their tenants. The reasons given for taking this approach were that the authority's staff:

- did not have the experience or confidence to draw a sample;
- could not set up a computer program to draw a sample from their records in time to carry out the survey;
- were intending to include the survey with a newsletter that was sent to all their tenants;
- wanted to analyse the data in more detail than would be possible with the sample size needed for their BVPI return.

#### *4.2.1.3 An alternative approach*

One authority had incorporated their BVPI Tenants Survey questions into a structural survey of all its rented properties. They pointed out that the structural survey was also a DETR requirement. Although the way in which properties were sampled did not comply with the requirement for the Tenants Survey, this was an interesting approach and, provided the sampling method can be suitably adapted, it is worth further consideration. (See the Case Studies below).

### *4.2.2 Response rates*

#### *4.2.2.1 What counted as a response?*

Some authorities were uncertain about how their contractor had dealt with ineligible addresses or with partially completed forms. One authority's contractor stopped interviewing when they had enough cases to meet the required confidence interval. This approach could lead to a biased sample if only those people that were easiest to contact were interviewed.

The response rate reported in the management database did not always correspond to the response rate mentioned in interviews. It was not always clear why this was, but it probably

came about because authorities did not always have relevant information about how ineligible cases, non contacts, partial returns and refusals were dealt with when their response rates were calculated.

#### 4.2.2.2 *Response expectations*

Local Authorities had very different expectations about the response rate they were likely to achieve. Some had decided to use face-to-face interviewing because they believed this to be the only way to achieve response rates of 50% or more, others were resigned to achieving a response as low as 25% or less. In some cases low expectations were based on previous experience of trying to survey tenants while other authorities were being guided by contractors. Some authorities that expected a low response rate (and allowed for this when they calculated their sample size) paid less attention than other authorities to trying to boost response and reduce bias.

#### 4.2.3 *Staff Resources*

As was the case with the General Survey, larger authorities such as County Councils and Unitary Authorities tended to have more staff resources available for the whole range of BVPI work, including running surveys, although the staff committed to the process did not always have research experience. Some authorities had set up central units to oversee the BVPI work and these units were used to run or contract out the range of satisfaction surveys. Smaller authorities did not have this level of resource. In some cases the work of carrying out the Tenants Survey had to be taken on, in addition to their regular work, by staff in the housing unit. One authority reported that the work was '*a struggle*' and that it was the first time their staff had been involved in setting up a survey.

#### 4.2.4 *Funding the Tenants Survey*

Finding the financial resources to carry out the Tenants Survey was a problem for some authorities. One used its 'tenant newsletter budget' to cover the operational cost of running the survey but its staff had to accommodate the work within their existing roles. In contrast other authorities had a designated budget for BVPI work and this could be used to fund the survey. However, some authorities still required their staff to make a case for funding to carry out the survey either from an existing budget for BVPI work or directly to their local councillors.

Some authorities felt that their ability to carry out the survey had been compromised because they had a very limited budget. This restricted their ability to issue reminders to reduce non-response. One authority also mentioned that it had made savings by cutting down on the number of pages used for its survey form; the authority's staff described this as

*'cramming it a bit'*.

#### 4.2.5 *The questionnaires and the BVPI questions*

Authorities either used the STATUS<sup>5</sup> questionnaire for their Tenants Survey or incorporated the BVPI questions into questionnaires of their own. Some authorities suggested that as some local areas are more desirable than others, it would be difficult to know if their tenants had made a distinction between their satisfaction with the housing provision and their views about their location. Authorities also commented that dissatisfaction with the condition of the housing stock could influence the answers to questions about involvement in the management process. One authority said that it had expected tenants to be dissatisfied with the condition of their properties because the authority had under-invested in repairs. However they did have a high level of resident involvement in local management committees and other means of consultation and the authority was surprised to be rated poorly on this topic. They thought that respondents were seeing this question as still being concerned with managing repairs.

Other authorities commented that the BVPI questions did not fit their local circumstances and that in their view the language used could have confused their tenants.

*'Not every day language'... 'overlong and complicated'.*

In some cases authorities changed the question wording: for instance BV175 was reworded to:

*'How satisfied are you with your opportunities to participate in management and decisions regarding the housing services that we provide?'*

BV174 was also seen by some authorities as

*'not customer friendly in its wording'.*

#### 4.2.6 *The Guidance*

All authorities mentioned that they had used the Purple Book but some had also purchased the STATUS survey manual. Most commented that they had found the guidance useful. However, some authorities mentioned that they had found the sections on sampling, confidence intervals and weighting difficult to follow. This criticism came from LA staff who did not have previous research experience. They suggested that a simpler, step by step format that would guide them through the processes would be helpful.

Other authorities mentioned that they had not been sure how to treat 'don't know' answers when analysing the data and that this should be made clearer in the guidance.

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<sup>5</sup> STATUS is the Standardised tenant satisfaction survey developed by the National Housing Federation. Details can be found at <http://www.housing.org.uk> (accessed July 2002).

#### *4.2.7 The letters file*

There were very few queries logged in the letters file about the Tenants Survey, but those that were included questions about sampling and how to treat 'don't know' answers.

### **4.3 Tenants Survey Case Studies.**

#### *4.3.1 A contracted-out survey using face-to-face interviews*

##### *4.3.1.1 Resources & Expertise:*

This Local Authority had a small in-house survey team, and staff who regularly carried out small-scale surveys. They used their own team of interviewers for exit surveys, or for projects that might require about fifty interviews on an estate. This team of interviewers was not big enough to carry out the Tenants Survey and therefore the authority contracted this work to a local company. The budget for their Tenants Survey was £24,000.

##### *4.3.1.2 Sampling*

The survey was based on a sample of tenants, drawn from those who had taken part in an earlier Tenants Survey and who had agreed to be contacted again. The sample for the earlier survey was a random probability sample drawn by their contractor from a complete list of all residential properties in their area. The list recorded addresses and tenure but it did not include the names of the residents. The authority had chosen to use this list instead of their council tenant list because it was easier to extract information from it. They also thought this approach would give them a comparison of how tenants' views had changed over time. Furthermore, they thought it would be easier to achieve an acceptable level of response by going back to respondents who had already agreed to be contacted on the previous survey. Their contractor did check to see if the sample had been skewed because it was drawn from respondents to an earlier survey. The results were weighted to take account of the age, work status and gender of the tenants that responded.

##### *4.3.1.3 Face-to-face interviews*

This authority used face-to-face interviews, because they believed this method would result in more accurate information and a better response rate than a self-completion questionnaire. Although this approach was successful, the cost of face-to-face interviewing was high and in the future, when this authority does another Tenants Survey, it may have to use a postal questionnaire.

##### *4.3.1.4 Interviewers' approach*

The interviewers had introductory letters that were addressed to 'the occupier'. Interviewers were supposed to deliver the letters in advance of their first attempt at personal contact but the authority was not sure if this was always done. The interview was intended to be with the head of household, and if this was not possible with another adult in the household whose

relationship to the head of household was recorded. If the accommodation was being sublet, interviewers asked to speak to whoever was the head of the household at the address at the time. Interviewers were required to make at least three calls at different times of the day to try to achieve contact. Only after three calls could the address be counted as a non-contact. The contractor had some interviewers from ethnic minorities and an interpreter was also available to facilitate interviews with ethnic minority tenants.

A press release let people know that the survey was taking place.

#### *4.3.1.5 The questionnaire*

The contractor drafted an agreed questionnaire based on instruments they had used with other authorities. The questionnaire included questions designed to cover local issues. The contractor handled all administrative tasks and data processing and as part of the contract carried out probity checks by recalling at a sample of addresses and checking some of the information that had been provided in the earlier interviews. They verified data entry by double keying the schedules.

#### *4.3.1.6 Response Rates*

A response rate of over 80% was reported, but this did not take account of the response achieved in the original survey to which the Tenants Survey was a follow-up. The contractor calculated the response rate and the confidence interval. Interviews with item non-response were counted as responding provided that at least 75% of the questions had been answered. No guidelines were agreed with the authority about which questions should count towards a response.

#### *4.3.1.7 The BVPI Questions*

This authority used the BVPI questions developed for the STATUS survey by DETR and the National Housing Federation. The authority disagreed with the way the Audit Commission and DETR advised that the results should be treated. The authority wanted to include respondents who said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied in the satisfied group as they regarded the proportion of tenants who were dissatisfied as the important datum.

#### *4.3.1.8 Adding Questions*

This authority took the opportunity to ask additional questions, in particular to find out how users viewed the maintenance service the authority provided. They also used the survey to ask tenants what they thought the authority's priorities should be.

#### *4.3.1.9 Contracting out the survey*

This authority found the DETR guidance notes very useful in helping them to draw up a tender, and in providing a checklist of the things they had to think about before tendering. The

contractor complimented them on the thoroughness of the briefing documentation that they provided. The contractor had meetings with the authority's team to set up the project, but after this progress was monitored by scheduled telephone and e-mail contacts every few weeks, to make sure that everything was progressing satisfactorily. If a problem occurred, the contractor informed the Authority immediately and worked with them to find a solution.

#### *4.3.1.10 DETR guidance*

The authority had used the Purple book. While they thought the advice it contained was usually clear, they also felt it could take some time to work through. In future they would value guidance in a format that was simpler and quicker to read. They thought that checklists based on good practice would be a good idea, and would like these to be written in a format that could be supplied to contractors as a specification.

### *4.3.2 A postal survey carried out in – house, with some specialised work contracted-out*

#### *4.3.2.1 Resources and Research expertise*

The authority had a team that carried out a range of research and BVPI monitoring consisting of a research officer, who had knowledge of statistics and analysed data, and two other staff. Some elements of the work, for instance data keying, were contracted out because the authority did not have the in-house resource necessary to handle the volume of data input involved. The authority was fully aware that it had to carry out surveys as part of the BVPI requirements and that the work had to be timetabled to meet DETR requirements. They had a budget set up for BVPI projects that covered both the cost of staff time and the operational cost of running the surveys.

#### *4.3.2.2 Planning and management*

The research team designed the Tenants Survey using the DETR guidance. They decided to use the STATUS model questionnaire. They commented that they

*‘wouldn’t do anything complicated.’*

All went to plan except they forgot to send in the results. So these were submitted a little late, although the work had been completed within the timetable.

#### *4.3.2.3 Sampling*

A computer program was used to draw a random sample of 1,500 names and addresses. They had achieved a response rate of 33%, albeit with a shorter questionnaire, on a previous survey of tenants and used this information, when following the Guidance about confidence intervals, in calculating their required sample size. If people had moved on, they did not substitute the current occupants or another address.

#### *4.3.2.4 Response rate*

A response rate of 41% was achieved which was better than the response rate they had expected.

#### *4.3.2.5 Methods*

Introductory letters were sent to named tenants. The letters dealt with confidentiality and the purpose of the survey, and mentioned that respondents would be entered in a prize draw with five prizes of £25 shopping vouchers. Confidentiality was expected to be an issue so the letter said that the survey gave people the chance to criticise the service they were given without it affecting their tenancies. The letter was signed by the head of the Housing and Environmental Health Department and included a contact number (not a freephone number as this was too expensive to set up) and an email address.

Calls were received from people:

- who wanted more information,
- needed reassurance about confidentiality,
- wanted to complete the questionnaire over the 'phone,
- or said they were not going to do it.

The research team did not want people to have to leave messages on an answerphone so after-office-hours calls were answered by the council's night service and a message passed to the team the following morning. A translation service covering 10 community languages was offered. Freepost envelopes were included with the questionnaire for its return. The authority used tenants' and residents' associations to encourage people to respond and briefed their local councillors about the project. They also publicised the survey in advance in the authority's quarterly newsletter and mentioned the prize draw.

They sent one reminder letter, but did not send an additional questionnaire. They were happy to send people who requested them replacement questionnaires. The reminder boosted response by 8%. It is the view of the authority that all the response boosting measures had some impact, but they are unable to say which had the most.

This authority did not check how representative a sample they had achieved although, anecdotally, they think that older people in sheltered accommodation were more likely to respond and younger, working people less likely. They did not attempt to weight their data. All the analysis was carried out in-house, using SPSS.

#### *4.3.2.6 The questions*

This authority used the STATUS questionnaire because they thought it would be easy to follow and because its tick-box format reduced the burden on respondents. Although the questionnaire contained 44 questions, the authority felt that people would see them as relevant

and also as giving them the chance to voice opinions about a wide range of topics. It was thought that using the STATUS questionnaire helped the authority to achieve a better than expected response rate.

#### *4.3.2.7 DETR Guidance*

The authority relied mainly on the guidance provided for STATUS but were not sure how to handle missing data or answers that had been coded as 'don't know' in the analysis. First they asked their corporate BVPI advisor for help, then they e-mailed DETR. In future they would like the guidance to be clearer about how to handle missing data.

#### *4.3.2.8 Using the information*

The information obtained in the survey has been used locally to improve service delivery. The authority is committed to a follow-up in three years' time. They had wanted to find out what was going on 'out there' and the BVPI requirements had given them the chance to do it.

#### *4.3.2.9 Comment*

This is an example of a smaller authority that had tackled the task in-house using basically sound methods, although given that the first reminder boosted response by 8% a second reminder (including a questionnaire) would have been worth trying. What is clear from this example was that the authority was aware of the BVPI requirements and had staff resources and a budget in place to meet these.

### *4.3.3 A survey of tenants combined with a structural survey*

#### *4.3.3.1 Introduction*

This authority had an innovative approach to carrying out the Tenants Survey. They combined the BVPI satisfaction questions with their own socio-economic survey (SES) and with their Stock Conditions Survey (SCS), which coincidentally was carried out to meet a DETR requirement and had to be undertaken within the same time frame as the BVPI Tenants Survey. The SCS was a detailed external physical survey of the Local Authority's stock of about 14,500 housing properties. A proportion of these properties was selected for an internal survey and when the structural surveyors carried this out they also asked the tenants to take part in the SES which included the BVPI questions.

#### *4.3.3.2 Response*

A response rate of nearly 100% was achieved as a result of carrying out the Tenants Survey in conjunction with the SCS. Only two households out of the 2,400 selected refused to take part. In order to achieve the highest possible response rate the authority focused on 'selling' the SCS. Tenants were told that the survey would be used to inform a 10-year programme of

bringing all the housing stock up to a decent standard. Tenants were aware that the SCS was assessing the state of the property they occupied and many realised that this assessment could lead to their accommodation being improved

#### *4.3.3.3 Personal contact*

The interviews with tenants were carried out by structural surveyors who were not trained interviewers. Nevertheless this personal approach still offered an advantage over a postal survey. The level of item non-response to the SES as a whole was about 1% with item non-response to questions about savings and moving to another dwelling slightly higher at 5%. Moreover, the authority saved money by getting structural surveyors who had in any case to inspect the interiors of council property, to carry out the Tenants Survey as well.

#### *4.3.3.4 Sample*

All the council's properties were surveyed externally but only 17% were selected to be surveyed internally. The sample of addresses chosen for the internal structural survey was not a compliant sample for the BVPI survey. This was because the SES sample was not a random probability sample of addresses but was designed to be representative of the different types of housing stock and took account of the age, number of bedrooms, number of storeys, and location of the properties.

However, since the SCS external survey requires surveyors to visit all an authority's housing stock, there is the potential for a sample to be designed that would meet both the SCS internal survey requirements and provide a random sample of tenants for the BVPI questions.

The Department may wish to investigate the feasibility of this approach given the advantages with response and data quality indicated by the example, and because Local Authorities may welcome the possibility of combining the two DETR requirements.

#### *4.3.3.5 Recommendations*

As with the General Survey, the strongest message that emerges from the Tenants Survey management database is that there is a need to ensure that the data required by the Department is collected by authorities. This, in turn, should have the effect of improving the methods employed by authorities to obtain those data. In particular, DETR should provide authorities with templates that specify the data to be collected and the methods for collecting them, and calculate the size of sample to be achieved, response rates and confidence intervals.

The majority of findings from the General Survey clearly also apply to the Tenants Survey, in particular the need to look at the applicability and wording of questions and evaluate the

appropriateness of sampling frames and techniques, weighting, resources. There are also distinct issues relating to the use of the STATUS methodology. While most authorities found the STATUS guidance useful it is clear that there is a need for less technical documentation for some, a need that could be met by support and advice from the Department.

The case studies illustrate a number of different approaches to undertaking the Tenants Survey all of which were successful if not perfect. This lends weight to the recommendation that the Department actively acknowledge the need among authorities for appropriate flexibility for all the surveys while not sanctioning the use of unacceptable practices such as quota sampling. By flexibility is meant allowing authorities to react to local circumstances and tailor their surveys in order to add value to those surveys and encourage innovation and buy-in to the survey process.

Nearly all authorities used a postal questionnaire to collect the survey data. However, in those authorities with comprehensive, up to date and accurate lists of telephone numbers for their tenants, consideration might be given to collecting most of the data by telephone, with face-to-face interviews or postal questionnaires used for tenants with no telephone. There are likely to be mode effects associated with this approach but these are likely to be outweighed by the increase in response rates due to the use of telephone interviewing.

## **5 Benefits Surveys**

### **5.1 Results from the management database**

A total of 310 authorities provided data about their Benefits Surveys.

#### *5.1.1 Adding questions*

Only one authority – a District Council - reported adding questions of local relevance.

#### *5.1.2 Target population*

Ten per cent of authorities provided no details about the target population for their survey of Housing Benefit Recipients. The likelihood of District Councils not providing these details was slightly above average (12%) while among Metropolitan Authorities and London Boroughs it was well below average (6% and 3% respectively).

#### *5.1.3 Was the survey contracted out?*

A fifth (19%) of surveys were contracted out and four fifths (81%) were carried out in-house. The likelihood of Metropolitan Authorities contracting out the survey was much lower than average (9%) while the proportion of London Boroughs contracting out was much higher (29%).

#### *5.1.4 Was the confidence interval criterion achieved?*

The confidence interval criterion was achieved by just over three-quarters of authorities (78%). Just under 90% each of Metropolitan Authorities and London Boroughs had achieved it compared with about three-quarters of Unitary Authorities and District Councils.

#### *5.1.5 Sampling frame used*

Despite the benefits register being the only possible sampling frame for this survey, just over 10% of authorities did not confirm their use of this frame. Unitary authorities and District Councils were twice as likely to have omitted this information as Metropolitan Authorities and London Boroughs (12% and 13% compared with 6% and 7%).

#### *5.1.6 Sampling Windows*

Over 40% of authorities had difficulty meeting DETR's requirements vis a vis sampling windows. These required that the questionnaire be dispatched to potential respondents 3-4 weeks after each sample window and no more than six weeks after. DETR recognised that some authorities had had difficulty adhering to the precise timing because of the Department's rush to implement the surveys and because of the technical difficulties they encountered. As it was the first year of data collection DETR adopted a pragmatic approach and accepted that authorities had used the required windows even if their timing did not match exactly that specified in the guidance. The proportion of Metropolitan Authorities who failed to meet the windows requirements was a lot lower than the average at 24% while among London Boroughs, at 52%, it was considerably higher.

#### *5.1.7 Explanation of sampling method used*

Just over 10% of authorities provided no explanation of the sampling method they had used for their Benefits Survey. Of those that returned information about this variable, 45% claimed to have used random sampling, 51% had carried out a census of benefit claimants and 4% had uses another method. The authorities that had not used random sampling or carried out a census included nine District Councils and one Metropolitan Authority.

#### *5.1.8 Were the data weighted?*

In total, 6% of authorities had weighted their data. Metropolitan Authorities were twice as likely as authorities as a whole to have weighted their data (12%). Further examination of the data showed that nine of the eighteen authorities that had weighted their data had, in fact, carried out a census of benefit claimants.

### 5.1.9 Questionnaire administration

Just under 10% of authorities did not provide details of how questionnaires were administered for the Benefits Survey. Of those that provided information about this variable, 99% had used postal methods. One authority had used a face-to-face approach and two had used postal and telephone methods in combination.

### 5.1.10 Response rates

Only 51 authorities provided details of response to the Benefits Survey (see Table 3, below). Response rates among the authorities that provided information about this variable ranged from 17% to 85%, with a mean of 47%. Unitary Authorities and London Boroughs had very similar mean response rates (37% and 39% respectively). Among Metropolitan Authorities the mean response rate was 43% and among District Councils it was slightly higher at 50%. No clear picture emerges about the relative merits, as far as mean response rates are concerned, of carrying out survey in-house or contracting them out. This is due in part to the small numbers of Unitary Authorities, Metropolitan Authorities and London Boroughs that

**Table 3 Benefits Survey: response rates\* by authority type and whether or not the survey had been contracted out**

Authority type	Percentages						
	Contracted out			In-house			All surveys
		Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	
County Council	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Unitary Authority	7	33	21-48	28	38	17-66	37
Metropolitan Authority	3	44	35-57	28	43	22-71	43
London Borough	7	41	33-53	19	38	21-62	39
District Council	34	55	23-76	142	49	19-85	50

\*excludes reported response rates of 0%

contracted out the Benefits Survey and also to the fact that it is not possible (given the very different ways authorities measured response) to be sure that like is being compared with like.

## 5.2 Interviews with local authorities

### 5.2.1 The sampling frame

Authorities were required by DETR to use their own records to identify claimants who had had a determination of either a new or renewal claim within the two time windows specified

by the guidance. Samples were then drawn from the eligible claimants identified. Some authorities found that drawing the samples and checking these to ensure that claimants were only included in only one time window required more work than they had planned for.

While most authorities reported that they were able to ensure that claimants were sampled only once across the two windows and only for only one claim, some authorities were not certain whether their systems would always identify people who had moved address and submitted a second claim, particularly if the second claim fell into the sample for the second window. Others were aware that their records were not always up to date and mentioned that they had received questionnaires marked 'gone away' and that some of the claimants they had approached had died. One authority mentioned that private tenants frequently had six-month leases and were therefore more likely to move and that they could not be that their records would be up to date for this group.

Another authority had contacted DETR about claims made for council tax rebates for a second adult in a household as the guidance did not make it clear whether or not these cases were eligible for the survey. The Department may want to clarify this issue in future guidance.

### 5.2.2 *Sample survey or census*

Some authorities decided to conduct a census of all their benefit claimants. The reasons given for taking this approach were that staff:

- did not have the experience or confidence to draw a sample;
- could not get a computer program set up to draw a sample from their records in time to carry out the survey; and
- expected a very poor response and reasoned that '*the more sent, the more we will get back*'.

However, many authorities did draw samples and some reported that they had adjusted the sample taken for the second window to allow for the number of returns achieved in the first. In some cases the authorities were relying on the expertise of their contractor to handle the sampling process and to re-weight the results but some authorities did this themselves using the DETR guidance.

One authority mentioned that they had calculated their sample size using the required confidence interval but had found the Guidance difficult to follow. The authority obtained an Excel file from the Housing Association, which had built into it a macro to carry out the calculation.

*'it is very useful you put in some variables and the macro pops out the figure you need to send too'*

### 5.2.3 *Response rates*

#### 5.2.3.1 *Possible inaccuracies in reported response rates*

The response rates reported by authorities may not all be accurate. Some authorities were uncertain about how their contractor had dealt with ineligible addresses or partially completed questionnaires. Some authorities that had carried out the survey in-house were not always clear about the number of questionnaires they had sent out or how they themselves had handled ineligible addresses and partially completed questionnaires when calculating response.

#### 5.2.3.2 *Response expectations*

Local Authorities' expectations about the response rate they were likely to achieve ranged from 60% to as little as 10%. In some cases this was based on previous survey experience, while in others authorities were accepting the advice of contractors. One of the authorities mentioned that their contractor had advised them to '*think low*' because it might be difficult persuading benefits claimants to take part in the survey.

### 5.2.4 *Resources available for the BVPI work*

Among the authorities that were interviewed, County Councils and Unitary Authorities tended to have more staff resources available for the whole range of BVPI work, including running surveys, than other types of authority, although the staff committed to the process did not always have research experience. Some authorities had set up a central unit to oversee the BVPI work and this unit was used to run or contract out the satisfaction surveys.

The number of staff available to carry out or advise on BVPI functions varied from one or two to much larger units, some with eight or more staff. (The larger units tended to cover a wide range of BVPI and associated planning functions). Many of the authorities interviewed could not estimate how much staff time the Housing Benefits Survey had required, but most thought that the input had been substantial.

For some authorities, carrying out the BVPI satisfaction surveys was their first experience of conducting a survey. One authority described spreading the task of setting up their Benefits Survey across more than one department. Their Finance division designed the letters and forms, the Benefits section drew the sample and handled all the stages of the postal survey, with support from the authority's computing staff. They contracted-out the 'statistical' work - the analysis of the results and the calculation of confidence intervals. None of the authority's staff had carried out a survey before and they found the operations required more time and resources than they had expected. In particular, this authority was aware of the large amount of staff time required to input data from questionnaires into an Access database.

Another authority with some in-house experience of conducting small-scale surveys also reported they had underestimated the task. They had assumed that they could simply absorb the work and use existing staff resources. In the event the authority underestimated the amount of staff time that would be needed at the planning stage:

*'[the planning needed] quite a lot of research time to make sure we got it right'.*

Then the project required much more liaison than they had expected between the benefit section, the BVPI central unit and the IT section. It also required liaison with DETR. The amount of time required to key the data from returned schedules was also underestimated and the authority used any staff with time available to do this work.

This authority also mentioned that its claimant databases had not been set up with the intention of being used to draw samples for the DETR work. They had to use specialist IT staff to restructure their computer records and to develop a programme to draw the sample.

#### *5.2.5 Funding the work*

Finding the financial resources to carry out the BVPI surveys was a problem for some authorities. Most of those interviewed reported that they had had to cover the operational cost of running the survey from existing budgets and that there was no budget specifically for the DETR work. The authorities' estimates of the costs of running the Benefits Survey ranged from £5,000 for a survey run in-house to £20,000 for one that was contracted out. However, it is likely these figures underestimate the true cost, as authorities could not always quantify the staff resources they had used.

Many of the difficulties described about staff resources and funding were a consequence of authorities carrying out the survey for the first time. Some authorities mentioned that they had learned from the experience and had already set up separate sections to handle BVPI requirements in the future. Others said that they would reassess how they would conduct the survey. Ideas that they would consider were:

- contracting the work out themselves;
- joining other authorities in a consortium to either to contract out the work or to share ideas and methods.

#### *5.2.6 Planning and Methods*

DETR required the Benefits Survey to be carried out in two waves. All the authorities interviewed had managed this although one started late and missed part of the first window. Some authorities mentioned that the staff who had to carry out the survey were always not told in good time of the BVPI requirements and then had to catch up on the timetable. One authority decided to contract out the work because of the required timetable and their doubts about being able to handle the analysis required in-house.

### 5.2.7 *The BVPI questions*

Authorities gave a number of different and sometimes conflicting views about the BVPI questions. At one extreme was the view that it was unrealistic to try to measure satisfaction using just a few questions, and that the questions do not assess whether the respondent understood the service provision or whether they had access to it. This authority was also concerned that asking people about the service overlooks the point that people will be conditioned by the result rather than the process:

*'People who apply for benefits only want to know if they are going to get it and that it is processed effectively in order to understand the outcome. They are not so interested in satisfaction with the staff and telephones etc'*

Other authorities were more positive about the headline satisfaction questions. One commented that the results were now being used to drive their action plan to improve the service. One authority liked the questions because the statements people had to respond to were not all positive or negative; in some cases agreeing with the statement meant the respondent was satisfied in others questions disagreeing corresponded to being satisfied. However, staff in another authority had a different view: they had gone through the questionnaire with a respondent who wanted help and thought that this feature of the statements confused the respondent. This authority also thought that some elderly people found the questions hard to understand.

### 5.2.8 *The Guidance*

Local Authority staff with more research experience used the guidance as a reference and thought it comprehensive. Staff with less or no research experience found the guidance more daunting. They suggested that a simpler step-by-step format that would guide them through processes such as sampling and weighting would be helpful. An Excel spreadsheet similar to that mentioned in section 6.2.2 above, with an embedded macro to carry out the sample size and weighting calculations could provide a model for a series of templates for Local Authority staff. One authority suggested that as well as templates DETR might consider providing common software for authorities to use, and pointed out that this would mean that the results would be in a common format to return to DETR.

### 5.2.9 *A consistent approach*

One authority was concerned that the guidance should be more prescriptive to ensure that the results were comparable across authorities. They had compared how they interpreted the guidance and carried out the Benefits Survey with neighbouring authorities and found some divergence. This authority also suggested that the survey could be carried out centrally in future, with authorities just supplying the information for the sample.

### *5.2.10 Positive effects of the Benefits Survey*

It was clear that some of the authorities interviewed were using the information they obtained from the Benefits Survey to improve the service they gave to their clients. One authority summed up the effect of having to carry out the satisfaction survey:

*'it has woken up some of our service providers'*

and commented that they saw this as the key benefit of the exercise because it had started an ongoing process that would make their service providers more responsive.

## **5.3 Benefits Survey case studies**

### *5.3.1 A contracted-out postal survey*

#### *5.3.1.1 Staff and resources*

The authority contracted the work out because their in-house staff resources were too limited for them to carry out the work themselves. They had to fund the work from an existing consultation budget as there was no specific money set aside for the DETR surveys. The contractor was one that they had worked with before.

#### *5.3.1.2 Sampling*

The authority's lists of benefit recipients were used as the sampling frame and their contractor calculated how many recipients to sample in each window. A response rate of 50% was assumed for the purpose of calculating the set sample size and the second sample was scaled down to take account of the number of interviews achieved in the first window.

#### *5.3.1.3 Methods used*

The questionnaire followed the format suggested by DETR, and the authority added one question at the end to invite respondents to take part in further consultation. They used a covering letter that detailed:

- the purpose of the survey;
- provided contact details including how to contact the authority's helpdesk; and
- confirmed that the survey was confidential.

It would have been clear that the letter and the survey questionnaire came from the Local Authority. In order to stimulate interest a prize draw was offered.

Up to two reminder letters were mailed out and a second copy of the questionnaire was included with the second letter.

#### *5.3.1.4 Response*

The final response rate across the two windows was 76%. The authority did point out that they have an 'older population' that might be more amenable to returning completed questionnaires.

The method used to calculate response excluded 5% of non-returned forms as an allowance for 'unknown deadwood'. Returned questionnaires were accepted as a response even if some sections had not been completed.

#### *5.3.1.5 Working with the contractor*

The contractor provided an interim report after the first window was completed and a full report at the end of the survey. The Local Authority worked with the contractor to ensure that the final report detailed how the sample was drawn and how the response rate was calculated.

#### *5.3.1.6 Comment*

This example demonstrates a good working relationship between an authority with staff who have research experience and a survey research contractor that the authority had already worked with. The methods used to calculate response rates, however, highlight the need for DETR to give more guidance, possibly in the form of a template, and a more detailed and prescriptive approach towards key survey calculations. It is not that the method of calculating response that the authority's contractor suggested was unreasonable but other authorities may not have made the same assumptions about deadwood or partially completed questionnaires.

Despite these caveats the authority achieved a good response rate to a postal survey.

### *5.3.2 A contracted-out postal survey carried out as part of a consortium*

#### *5.3.2.1 Resources*

This authority contracted out their Benefits Survey because:

- they did not have the in-house staff resource to carry out the work within the specified timetable;
- they did not have the expertise to handle the statistical elements of the survey; and
- they were able to join a consortium of neighbouring authorities.

#### *5.3.2.2 Sampling*

The authority drew samples of benefit recipients for the two windows using a program written in-house to take names and addresses from their benefits database. In the first window they sampled 2,000 benefit recipients but because of good response the sample for the second window was scaled back to 600.

#### *5.3.2.3 Methods used*

The questionnaire and the covering letter sent by the contractor to sampled benefit recipients made it clear that the survey was being carried out for the authority but that the data were being collected by a private company. Two reminders were used for each sampling window; the second included a new copy of the questionnaire.

#### *5.3.2.4 Response rate*

The response rate achieved for the first sampling window was over 50% so the number of benefit recipients sampled for the second window was reduced. The response rate across the two windows was 55%.

#### *5.3.2.5 Working with the contractor*

The authority joined a consortium of neighbouring authorities that were using the same contractor to carry out the survey. The contractor had approached the authorities to suggest that it could carry out the DETR work for them. It was a company that was well known and had worked with many local authorities before. The consortium set up a forum to discuss the survey on a regular basis. In addition they each had a named contact point with the contractor from whom they received regular information about progress.

#### *5.3.2.6 Comment*

The authority was pleasantly surprised by the response rate they achieved and thought that their contractor had been very professional. This was an example of a consortium approach to running the survey but in this case the collaboration between authorities had been initiated by the contractor.

### *5.3.3 An In-house postal survey*

#### *5.3.3.1 Resources*

This authority decided to carry out their Benefits Survey in-house primarily because they were already doing other, smaller scale satisfaction surveys. In the event they realised that they had underestimated the resources it would require to take on a project of this scale.

The primary research resource was just one person but about 10 other staff out of a total of 34 were used to carry out labour intensive processes such as data entry. A specific budget was not set aside to cover operational costs such as printing, and postage, and an attempt was made to absorb the costs of survey specific work into 'normal' work.

The authority found that the work took more staff time than they had expected, particularly in the initial planning stage, in monitoring returns and sending out reminders and in processing the returned questionnaires.

### *5.3.3.2 Sampling*

Staff working on the Benefits Survey liaised with IT specialists to develop a program to list all benefit claims that had been determined within each sampling window. They did not attempt to draw a sample but sent the questionnaires to everyone on the list. They adopted this approach because they expected a poor response. Although their records were kept as up to date as possible, the authority found that, unbeknown to them, some claimants had moved.

### *5.3.3.3 Methods*

The authority was late in sending out the questionnaires for the first window and as a consequence no reminders were used. For the second window they sent a reminder letter after four weeks to all benefit recipients who had not responded and introduced a prize draw. They assumed that people on benefits or on a low income might be encouraged by a £50 prize voucher.

Staff in the authority felt that their lack of experience in carrying out surveys had meant that they had to set up a lot more contact between different departments than they had expected. This slowed the planning and implementation of the survey and was the main reason why the survey was late starting.

A covering letter was sent out with the questionnaire in a standard plain white envelope with a pre-paid return envelope. Both the questionnaire and the covering letter carried the local authority's logo printed in corporate colours. In addition, key questions in the questionnaire had been highlighted and very clear routing between questions was provided. The letter made it clear that people did not have to include their names and addresses if they did not want to.

A helpline was available during office hours and an answerphone outside office hours. Very few queries were received. Some elderly recipients mentioned that it was hard enough to fill the claim forms in without having to complete the questionnaire as well.

### *5.3.3.4 Response rate*

Response rates of 12% in the first window and 19% in the second were disappointing. The authority counted any forms returned by the Post Office as ineligible but also appears to have counted as ineligible some blank forms that might more realistically have been seen as refusals.

### *5.3.3.5 DETR guidance*

This authority used the DETR guidance, primarily the yellow book, and thought that it was very detailed. Their main comment was that the guidance needs to be simplified for people inexperienced in doing surveys.

#### *5.3.3.6 Comment*

Staff in this authority thought that they had learnt a lot from their experience of trying to carry out the survey in-house. If they were to carry out the project in-house again they would allow much more staff time for planning and attempt to improve the response rate they achieved. This authority felt that a more prescriptive set of guidance and possibly even common software would make it easier for people without survey experience to run the survey, and might ensure more comparable results across authorities.

In this example the survey, and more particularly the response rate, was hampered by a late start in the first window which meant that the authority did not follow up non-response with any form of reminder. For the second they made use of a reminder and a prize draw and achieved a slightly better response rate. This would seem to indicate that a more developed approach to the survey could improve the response rate achieved.

#### *5.3.4 An in-house postal survey with data processing contracted out*

This authority had some experience of doing surveys in-house, but this was their first mandatory survey with a specified timetable.

##### *5.3.4.1 Resources*

The authority found it difficult to quantify how much staff time had been used, but they were aware of a substantial input at the planning stage of the survey. Processing data from the questionnaires, which would be beyond their staff resources, was contracted out. Similarly, the authority realised that it had not got the expertise or the resources to check the representativeness of their response or to attempt to do any weighting.

##### *5.3.4.2 Sampling*

The authority included everyone who had had a claim dealt with within the specified windows in the sampling frame. However, they did not attempt to sample from this frame but, because they were not confident about drawing a random sample, sent a questionnaire to everybody. Lack of resources meant that no check for duplications were carried out either within the sample for each window or between the two samples.

##### *5.3.4.3 Methods*

The authority's benefits database was not set up to run surveys. As a result specialist staff had to write a programme to capture those benefit recipients who met the sample criteria and then make that information available for mail merges and label printing. It had taken some time to get this programme to work effectively.

The authority sent a covering letter, which included information about confidentiality and provided respondents with a named contact. The letter and questionnaire were mailed to respondents using the authority's normal headed paper and white window envelope. Staff got some calls in response to the letter but not about the survey. The contact point was seen as a number that people could ring to

*'get through the back door to expedite their benefit claim'.*

A reminder letter was sent out two weeks after the original mail out but it did not have much effect on response.

#### *5.3.4.4 Response rate*

The authority wasn't sure what response rate to expect but in the event achieved 20%. Authority staff felt that the people most likely to respond were those who had made a successful new claim and perhaps some who had been denied. Those making renewal claims seemed less likely to respond to the questionnaire. It was felt that the latter were perhaps concerned about completing the questionnaire, because they feared that their benefit could be reduced if they gave information to the local authority.

#### *5.3.4.5 Comment*

Staff at this authority felt that they had been faced with a steep learning curve in undertaking the Benefits Survey. In future they would leave more time to plan the survey and they would look again at ways of boosting response. They would also consider contracting out tasks such as sampling, calculating confidence intervals and weighting the data for which they do not expect to develop in-house expertise. Although response to the survey was disappointing, the authority has used the information to set up an action plan to try and improve the service they are giving to housing benefit applicants.

### **5.4 Recommendations**

Many authorities had clearly struggled to supply DETR with the methodological data relating to the Benefits Survey. This was the case even for items that should have been straightforward such as the sampling frame used. If authorities were given a clear indication at the start of the survey process that these data would be required and provided with a standard template in which to provide them, the amount of missing data would be reduced considerably.

The vast majority of authorities used a postal questionnaire to collect the survey data. However, if authorities have comprehensive, up to date and accurate telephone numbers for their benefit claimants, they might wish to consider telephone surveys as a suitable method of data collection, with face-to-face interviews or postal questionnaires for benefits claimants

with no telephone. Of course there are likely to be mode effects associated with this approach but, as with the Tenants Survey, these are likely to be outweighed by the increase in response rates resulting from the use of telephone interviewing.

From the data supplied by authorities to the Department it was not possible to compare results to the survey to see if they differed according to the 'window' applicants were surveyed in. DETR may, nevertheless wish to reconsider the need for sampling windows, given the fact that over 40% of authorities struggled to meet their requirement.

The case studies illustrate that very good response rates were possible but that to achieve them authorities had to implement a range of different strategies. As with the other surveys, there is clearly a need for the Department to place more emphasis on the ways in which response can be boosted and the resources that are required to implement them.

Many of the authorities interviewed encountered difficulties in drawing samples because their computer systems were designed specifically for the processing of benefits claims. Clearly they need to allocate time and resources to modifying their existing databases or to developing programs that can draw samples from their records.

## **6 Planning Survey**

### **6.1 Database findings**

A total of 318 authorities provided some data about their Planning Surveys. It is not possible to say which of the other authorities, which include eight County Councils, nine Unitary Authorities, five Metropolitan Authorities, eight London Boroughs and 39 District Councils, made no return because they have no planning functions. While it could well be true for the smaller authorities it is unlikely to be the case for Metropolitan Authorities and London Boroughs.

#### *6.1.1 Questions added*

Only three authorities appeared to add questions of their own to the Planning Questionnaire.

#### *6.1.2 Details of the target population sampled*

Of the authorities that returned at least some data about their Planning Survey, just under 11% provided no details of their target population. Of the rest, apart from County Councils about 9 out of 10 authorities provided details of their target population. Among the former about three quarters of authorities (73%) provided details.

### 6.1.3 *Was the survey contracted out?*

Only nine per cent of authorities that had made a return had contracted out the Planning Survey. The latter consisted of 14% of Unitary authorities, 8% of London Boroughs and 11% cent of District Councils.

### 6.1.4 *Was the confidence interval criterion met?*

Of the authorities that made a return, 38% met the criterion and 62% did not. In Unitary Authorities and District Councils about four out of ten authorities met the criterion. Among London Boroughs the proportion was five out of ten and in Metropolitan Authorities, seven out of ten. These differences can be partly explained by the fact that County Councils. None of the 26 County Councils met the confidence interval criterion. It should be borne in mind that County Councils are responsible for large planning applications and for applications concerning minerals and waste and thus deal with a relatively small caseload in comparison with other types of authority. [

In future, the guidance provided by DETR should explain how authorities with a small number of cases from which to sample can, nevertheless, meet the required confidence interval standards. Local authorities in this position should be required to provide the Department in advance with estimates of the total number of applications they expected to receive in a year and in each fieldwork window.

### 6.1.5 *Sampling frame*

Of the authorities that made a return, 87% gave details of the sampling frame used, and in all but one case it was their list of planning applications. The remaining 13% of authorities provided no details. County Councils (27%) were much more likely than authorities as a whole not to have provided details of their sampling frame.

### 6.1.6 *Sampling method explained*

Of the authorities that made a return, just under a fifth (18%) did not explain the sampling method they had used, nine per cent had used a random sample and 73% had carried out a census of planning applications. One authority claimed to have used quota sampling. Some light is thrown on the reason why a high proportion of authorities carried out censuses in section 7.2 'Interviews with authorities'.

### 6.1.7 *Were the rules about sampling windows adhered to?*

Of the authorities that had made a return, 61% had adhered to the rules about sampling windows and 39% had not. As for differences between authority types; County councils were much less likely than Unitary Councils, London Boroughs and District Councils to have

adhered to the sampling window rules (42% compared with 56% - 63%) while Metropolitan Authorities were more likely to have adhered to them than any other type of authority (68%).

#### 6.1.8 *Were the data weighted?*

Of the authorities that had made return, only two - a District Council and a Metropolitan Authority had weighted their data.

#### 6.1.9 *How the survey had been carried out*

Of authorities that had made a return, just under 12% provided no details of how they had carried out their Planning Surveys. Of the remainder, 82% had carried out a postal survey, four per cent had interviewed respondents by telephone and two per cent had used a mixture of methods involving post, telephone and e-mail. Of the thirteen authorities that had carried out telephone surveys, eight had done the work in-house and five had contracted it out.

#### 6.1.10 *Response*

The mean response rate for the Planning Survey as a whole, after excluding those authorities that claimed to have achieved a nil response, was 54%, with a range of 5% to 97% (see Table 4, below). County councils achieved the highest mean response rate (67%) followed by District Councils (56%), Metropolitan Authorities (49%), Unitary Councils (47%) and London Boroughs (41%). Authorities of each type that had contracted out their Planning Survey tended to achieve higher mean response rates than those that had carried them out in-house. They did this largely because they avoided the very low response rates achieved by in-house surveys rather than because they achieved response rates in the mid to high seventies and above. Since almost all the surveys were administered by post a comparison of response rates by type of survey makes no sense. Suffice it to say that the mean response rate for postal surveys at 53% differed little from the mean for the survey as a whole.

**Table 4 Planning Survey: response rates\* by authority type and whether or not the survey had been contracted out**

Authority type	Contracted out		In-house		Percentages		
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	All surveys		
County Council	-	-	16	67	48-97	67	
Unitary Authority	5	58	52-63	27	45	26-74	47
Metropolitan Authority	-	-	28	49	26-72	49	

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London Borough	2	57	54-60	19	40	5-66	41
District Council	21	59	35-74	21	56	20-87	56

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\*excludes reported response rates of 0%

## 6.2 Interviews with authorities

### 6.2.1 Sampling

#### 6.2.1.1 Problems caused by the format of records

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, mailed out a questionnaire with every planning decision notice and carried out a census rather than a survey of planning applications.

#### 6.2.1.2 Applicability of applications and applicants

Larger local authorities said that consideration of the sorts of applications they register, for example the siting of incineration plants and large housing developments, and of 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 to be included in the BVPI surveys.

#### 6.2.1.3 The effects of sampling agents

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.

One authority chose to ignore the guidance and leave agents out of its sample of applicants. Instead it sampled applications and sent questionnaires to applicants regardless of whether or not an agent had been involved. Its rationale for this approach was that it dealt with up to 15 agents who, together, accounted for about 40% of all 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 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.

### *6.2.2 BVPI Questions*

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.

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.

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

## **6.3 Case studies**

### *6.3.1 A postal survey with a good response, carried out in-house by a single member of staff*

#### *6.3.1.1 Staff and financial resources*

The person who carried out the survey is an Administration Manager for a District Council. She had no research background but had had some previous experience of carrying out surveys. No specific budget was allocated for the survey. She received no prior warning that the survey was taking place and so was unable to submit a request for additional funding. Moreover, details of DETR's requirements were initially sent to the BVPI co-ordinator and were not cascaded swiftly, which reduced the amount of time available to carry out the survey.

#### *6.3.1.2 Guidance*

The guidance about the sample was thought to be unclear, but instead of seeking DETR advice she proceeded on her own interpretation and sent questionnaires to people who had both applied and received a decision in same quarter. Because the number of applications

received in a year is so small she decided to carry out a census of applicants. The guidance about confidence intervals

*'meant nothing to me so I ignored it'.*

She felt that as long as she presented all the data, someone at the 'other end' could work 'all that' out.

The Guidance about survey design and fieldwork was on the whole helpful, not least because it was prescriptive and told authorities exactly what to do and how. She found it less clear about analysis and about what information she was required to return to ATP and DETR:

*'It was really above me, I'm not a statistician.'*

#### *6.3.1.3 Enhancing response*

A covering letter was tailored from the example given in the guidance, and signed electronically by the Chief Executive. The letter included her name and a number to contact during office hours. An email address was also included (but not made use of). The survey was mentioned at a focus group held for planning agents.

The response rate over all four windows was 77%. She estimated that the response rate was no more than 30% in each window before reminders were sent. The first reminder letter was sent after 2-3 weeks, with another questionnaire and prepaid envelope. The letter said how important applicants' views were and how they could help improve the quality of service provided. This lifted response to just under 65%. Then a postcard was sent as second reminder a couple of weeks later. Lack of staff resources led to only one reminder being sent out in the second quarter and response fell by 30 percentage point compared with the first quarter.

#### *6.3.1.4 Comment*

In this example an individual with limited survey experience managed to achieve a high response rate by dint of following the guidance on enhancing response provided by DETR. However, lack of research experience meant that guidance about sampling, calculating confidence intervals and about how to submit data to ATP was not understood and as a result ignored.

### *6.3.2 A postal survey carried out in-house that achieved a poor response rate*

#### *6.3.2.1 Staff and financial resources*

A total of four planning officers and a clerk worked on the survey. None of them had a background in survey research. No budget was earmarked for the survey.

#### 6.3.2.2 *Sampling*

The guidance about sampling was not followed because it looked too difficult. It was decided to send a questionnaire out with every decision notice along with the decision letter, stamped-up plans and permissions about building regulations. The results of a pilot survey carried out in 1998 led them to expect a low response rate. The rules about sampling windows were not followed in part because to do so could have led to even lower response rates than those achieved. It was decided to just

*'bung [a questionnaire] in each envelope'.*

For the sake of simplicity, agents who had already received a questionnaire were not then removed from the sample.

#### 6.3.2.3 *Response*

The response rate of 23% that was achieved was deemed *'not bad'*. It was about what had been expected. The rate was calculated simply by dividing how many questionnaires had been returned by how many had been sent out.

No covering letter had been enclosed with the questionnaires, just a couple of sentences of explanation, including a mention of anonymity, at the top of the form. No date by which questionnaires should be returned was specified, but a pre-paid envelope for replies was enclosed.

Lack of resources meant that nothing was done to chase non-respondents – no additional questionnaire or reminders were sent out. Because of the authority's commitment to anonymity for respondents there was no way of knowing who had responded and who had not.

#### 6.3.2.4 *Guidance*

The Guidance was received via a central Best Value unit and passed on in good time for planning the survey. It was read and understood but the staff carrying out the Planning Survey, decided to tailor their practice to make it fit their own requirements to keep simple things such as sampling and sampling windows.

#### 6.3.2.5 *Comment*

This authority was committed to keeping things simple for themselves. Despite having understood the guidance they chose to ignore much of what it said about sampling and enhancing response. Moreover, an earlier pilot survey led them to believe that response would almost inevitably be low.

### *6.3.2.6 Recommendations*

Findings from the management database together with what authorities told us about how they undertook fieldwork for the Planning Survey illustrate the need for the Department to take a more active role in prescribing key elements of the survey process if their methodological requirements are to be met. In some cases those undertaking the survey didn't understand the guidance and decided to ignore it; in other cases the guidance was understood but still ignored.

DETR clearly needs to convince LAs either of the need to carry out the BV surveys in the prescribed manner, or, if LAs have good reason to diverge from the guidance, of the need to discuss their alternative proposal with the Department.

Many authorities also struggled to undertake the survey within the four prescribed sampling windows. According to DETR, the purpose of using four sampling windows was to spread the workload over the year and at the same time increase the number of completed applications that authorities could sample. However, organising the survey within the windows may have placed too much of a burden on some authorities especially given the high percentage of authorities who undertook this survey in-house. In many authorities the number of completed applications was still small and despite reassurance in the guidance concerning small achieved sample sizes and the effect on confidence intervals, these authorities came to the conclusion that they had failed to meet the confidence interval criterion. A further problem was that many authorities had difficulty finding out who had been sampled in previous windows. Given these factors the Department should consider revising the requirements for the Planning Survey so that sampling can be carried out continuously through the survey year.

The Department also needs to consider carefully the target population of this survey, given the roles of agents in the planning process. One option would be to sample all applicants, not agents, and to ask agents about their global views of the service in a separate exercise. Alternatively, agents could be asked to comment on those applications they took responsibility for. This approach would mean that agents would have to respond to the survey more than once.

A further issue is whether the classification questions are appropriate or meaningful when asked of agents. The questionnaire has a few questions about planning followed by the full set of questions on personal information. A way round this would be to make the classification questions 'not applicable' for agents, many of which are in fact companies and not individuals

A final but important issue that emerged from the Planning Survey was that while the guidance made it clear that the questionnaire should not be sent with the planning decision letter, it is clear that in a number of authorities this did happen. The Department needs to

make it very clear that this should not happen: respondents could reasonably complain about being asked to fill in (yet) another form before the outcome of their application had been established and this could affect their views. Moreover, in the absence of a decision, respondents' views about the application process might well be incomplete.'

## **7 Library Surveys**

### **7.1 Findings from the management database**

A total of 149 authorities were eligible to carry out a Library Survey. However, just under a quarter (23%) did not place any data about their survey on the management database. Accordingly the rest of the analysis of the data from the management database has been carried out with a base of 116 authorities.

#### *7.1.1 Additional questions*

The majority of authorities made use of the Public Libraries User Surveys (PLUS) questionnaire, which includes questions on a comprehensive range of topics concerning local authority libraries. Authorities were not, however, required to collect these data for Best Value purposes.

#### *7.1.2 Details about the target population*

Eighty six per cent of authorities claimed to have reached their target population. However, while the DETR guidance imposed an age limitation for eligible respondents the PLUS guidance did not. This meant that there was some confusion about what the target population for the survey actually was.

#### *7.1.3 Was the survey contracted out?*

All but three authorities (3%) carried out the survey in-house. However, interviews with authorities revealed that contractors were, on occasion, used for fieldwork - for example, handing out questionnaires - when surveys were carried out in-house.

#### *7.1.4 Was the confidence interval criterion met?*

Eighty two per cent of authorities met the confidence interval criterion.

#### *7.1.5 Sampling frame*

Because libraries had to sample a moving population, the concept of a sampling frame is not applicable to this survey. Nevertheless, 88% of authorities gave details of the sampling frame used.

#### *7.1.6 Does the sampling method meet the standard?*

Eighty six per cent of authorities claimed to have used a sampling method that they thought met the standard.

#### *7.1.7 Are the sampling windows correct?*

Eighty six per cent of authorities reported having met the requirement to sample over one week. However, the PLUS methodology allows for an extension of more than a week in order to achieve sufficient respondents while the DETR guidance refers to 'a sampling week' and later 'at least one week'.

#### *7.1.8 Explanation of the sampling method used*

All authorities that had made a return claimed to have used an acceptable sampling methodology rather than that of DETR. Most of those authorities that were coded as not having met the sampling methods standard provided no information on the sampling methods they had used.

#### *7.1.9 Were the data weighted?*

Eighty three per cent of authorities had not weighted their data. Is it not clear how or why the remaining 17% of authorities weighted their data.

#### *7.1.10 Method of questionnaire delivery*

All but one authority reported they had handed out questionnaires to people entering libraries but how exactly this was done could vary from library to library. Moreover, some authorities provided an area where respondents could sit and fill in their questionnaires, others allowed some questionnaires to be returned by post.

#### *7.1.11 Steps taken to improve response*

Very little was recorded about what authorities had done to improve response. Two had issued a press release; one provided a pre-paid envelope for returning questionnaires not completed in the library and one offered a prize draw involving gift vouchers.

#### *7.1.12 Response rates*

Just under a fifth of authorities (19%) provided no information about response rates. The remainder reported rates in the range 4% - 100%. A 4% response rate (along with an achieved sample of 1,266 respondents) seems unrealistic. A response rate as high as 100% also seems unlikely.

**Table 5 Library Survey: response rates\* by authority type**  
Percentages

<b>Authority type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Range</b>
County Council	17	81	46-94
Unitary Authority	27	82	38-94
Metropolitan Authority	24	82	27-96
London Borough	21	76	31-98
District Council	-	-	-

\*excludes reported response rates of 0%

The mean response rate over the whole survey was 80% once unlikely outliers had been removed. Differences in mean response rates between authorities were not marked. The mean rate for London Boroughs was 76% while for other authority types it was 81% or 82%.

## **7.2 Interviews with authorities**

### *7.2.1 Introduction*

The themes reported on in this section 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 and with a representative of CIPFA, the organisation responsible for developing the methodology of the PLUS surveys.

### *7.2.2 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.

Some authorities realised that the methodology required by DETR was 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.

### 7.2.3 *Guidance*

The guidance provided by DETR originally led 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 provided by the Department suggested that the PLUS model would be acceptable. This overlooked the fact that PLUS uses a sample of libraries within each authority. DETR also required authorities to achieve a confidence interval of +/- 5% for the results from each library. This confusion led to correspondence between DETR and CIPFA which resulted in authorities being allowed to sample a total of 1,000 adult library users across their static libraries.

As was the case with the other Best Value 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.

### 7.2.4 *Sampling*

The PLUS model is based on a sample of libraries within each authority (except where the total number is small, in which case all libraries are included in the sample). This is the element of the PLUS methodology that authorities were required to vary their in order to meet DETR's requirements for the libraries survey. 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 users that would need to be approached to achieve 1,000 completed questionnaires in total; and
- 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 sampling in order to ensure that sufficient library users in specific age groups were included in their sample. Others, where a daily quota of questionnaires to be handed out had been specified, provided

no guidance to their staff on exactly how questionnaires should be handed out in each time slot.

### *7.2.5 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.

#### *7.2.5.1 Dealing with non-response*

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 ineligible, which had the effect of unnecessarily reducing response rates. Common views did not appear to exist about how to deal with partially completed questionnaires. Some authorities considered a questionnaire to constitute 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.

#### *7.2.5.2 Enhancing response*

Some authorities did nothing more than hand 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.

### *7.2.6 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. Best Value requires a distinction to be made between requests for information and a request to reserve a book. This distinction is not covered by PLUS. Local authorities were not initially 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.

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. There is such a question on the General Survey but clearly the staff concerned were not aware of this.

### **7.3 Views of the Society of Chief Librarians and CIPFA**

#### **7.3.1 *Problems caused by modifications to the PLUS methodology***

The Association of Chief Librarians (ACL) 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 Authorities that have a rolling programme of Library Surveys and it 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 to no more than 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 following DETR guidance to include all libraries in their sample, would be that some libraries would be handing out at most out two or three questionnaires.

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.

#### **7.3.2 *BV118***

ACL and CIPFA said 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 BV118 would not work.

### 7.3.3 *Using visitor numbers to calculate the set sample size*

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 because it will not take account of people's repeat visits. 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 and this fact should be allowed for when staff are estimating the set sample (as distinct from the achieved) size.

### 7.3.4 *Topic areas*

ACL and CIPFA would like to review DETR's topic areas. The Department of Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) 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, in terms of the questions asked, the timetable and the sample design to be used.

## 7.4 **Case study**

There was not a great deal of variation in the experiences of authorities in carrying out the Libraries Survey, so in this section only one case study is reported on.

### 7.4.1 *Research expertise & Resources*

The Authority used its Library Administration Department to handle surveys. This department's staff had been halved so resources were '*quite stretched*'.

*'Something such as CIPFA/PLUS does take up a considerable amount of time, it sort of takes over your life, if you like, while you are at work'.*

Staff had had no formal research training and only the experience of a previous survey to draw on. Relief staff had to be used for handing out questionnaires because some libraries only have one member of staff on duty at any one time.

### 7.4.2 *Budget*

There is a survey budget within the library budget of about £1,000, but no extra resources were available. Work that staff would have normally have done had to be put off. They used an in-house reprographics unit to print the questionnaire and the comments sheets at a cost of about £400. The completed questionnaires were sent to CIPFA who scanned the forms and analysed the data. This cost approximately £1,400. Costs were also incurred in using relief staff to do fieldwork but these could not be estimated.

### 7.4.3 *Methods*

Senior managers in branch libraries were told what was required and they in turn briefed the staff distributing the questionnaires who were also given written instructions.

The survey took a long time to plan and carry out but this was allowed for in the authority's timetable. In the event, the survey started on time but fieldwork overran. Because of their limited staff resources, branch libraries were offered a choice about which week they started the survey.

#### 7.4.4 *Sampling and response*

The authority surveyed all 16 of their libraries and allowed for a 25% refusal rate. The libraries had daily quotas of distributed questionnaires to fill based on their visitor counts. Staff were given a very rough guide as to how many per hour to hand out and then

*'It was left up to the staff to hand them out as best they could'*

If staff did not achieve the quota they were told to continue handing out questionnaires until they reached their target. Over half the libraries had to continue handing out surveys in a second week. In one branch library (single staffed and only open 13 hours a week) fieldwork ran for three weeks as staff tried to avoid sampling library users more than once. In the end they had to stop issuing questionnaires.

The authority knew the sample was supposed to be selected randomly but advised their branches to:

*'...use their own discretion and try and survey a cross-section of their borrowers'*

#### 7.4.5 *Response*

A response rate of 84% was achieved.

Staff in branch libraries were responsible for indicating on the questionnaire whether or not the person approached had refused. Even if only one question had been answered, a questionnaire was counted as a response. It was not clear how staff dealt with cases where people refused a questionnaire because they had already completed one earlier in the week or exactly how they avoided including people more than once in the survey.

Nothing was done to enhance response. Translations were not thought to be needed for their small number of ethnic minority residents and questionnaires with large print were not provided either.

#### 7.4.6 *The Guidance*

This authority used the CIPFA/PLUS website, which they found useful, to download the latest updated questionnaire.

They mentioned that they were supposed to provide information for the BV118 indicator, covering requests for information and library reservations separately, but pointed out that no one had told them to do it, they only found out from their marketing department.

They also didn't know they were supposed to provide details of confidence intervals until they were asked for them.

*'The information doesn't seem to filter through. We don't know about it until we are asked for it'.*

They used a file from the CIPFA/PLUS website to calculate the confidence intervals.

*'It was dead easy, but it was just knowing about it'.*

Staff thought that the checklists and templates to be found on the IPF website were a good idea. They also liked the website flow chart that described what to do when a survey was completed. They had also used the PLUS guidance but thought it was badly written.

#### 7.4.7 *Comment*

This is an example of an authority carrying out the Libraries Survey with limited resources. It also illustrates some of the difficulties involved in controlling how a sample is drawn across a number of libraries. A good response rate was achieved although, the example highlights issues about double counting, ineligible and what is accepted as a completed questionnaire.

### **7.5 Recommendations**

At the time of the 2000/01 Best Value exercise the majority of libraries already used the PLUS survey to collect data on the libraries service, so it made sense to allow libraries to use the PLUS methodology for the Best Value Library Survey. However there were some differences in the methodology specified in PLUS and the requirements of the libraries indicators and this may have caused confusion or uncertainty among some authorities. In the future, the Department needs to work closely with PLUS and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to ensure that common aims are achieved and that the metadata required by the Department is received in a suitable format.

The criticisms that have been voiced about the reservation element of the question on which BV118 is based suggest that the Department and DCMS need to consider the relevance of reservation to Best Value. It suggests also that both departments should give some thought, together with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accounting and the (CIPFA) and the Institute of Public Finance (IPF), to the data that should be collected in the Best Value Library Survey.

The fact that some authorities were unaware of the data available from the General Survey on satisfaction with the libraries service illustrates how, for this and the other survey, more work is required to promote the analysis and use of the survey data within authorities.

Because questionnaires were handed out at the point of service it was hard for DETR to control in the way in which fieldwork was carried out for the Library Survey. Control would be easier to impose if questionnaires were to be given to sample of library users drawn from lists of holders of library membership cards. This approach, however, would not capture the views of the many library users who do not have a library card.

The key issue is whether or not DETR will be able to accept the PLUS methodology which involves carrying out a sample of libraries in any one authority and not a census.

Alternatively DETR, CIPFA and IPF could work on achieving a common methodology acceptable to all.

## **8 Alternative ways of carrying out the BV surveys**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Clearly co-ordinating a maximum of five surveys in approximately 400 separate authorities (approx. 1,600 surveys were undertaken in total in 2000/01) to standardised methodologies is a not an insignificant task. It is therefore appropriate to consider if there might be an alternative approach to collecting the Best Value performance indicator data required to measure the quality of services provided as judged by local citizens.

#### *8.1.1 Conducting the survey(s) centrally*

Some authorities suggested that it might be better for DETR to handle the General Survey centrally by contracting it to a national survey organisation rather than ask all local authorities to mount the exercise individually. This suggestion was often linked to the view that the BVPI questions were not relevant to local needs and that the timing of the exercise did not meet their requirements for information for planning.

There are a number of points to consider about a centrally run survey:

#### *8.1.2 Sampling*

Drawing a random sample from the PAF for a national General Survey would be straightforward. However, the sample would have to be mapped on to Local Authority areas. To ensure that the achieved sample was large enough in each Local Authority area, the likely local response to the survey would have to be taken into account when calculating the set sample size. The results would have to be weighted to take account of non-response. An alternative sampling frame would be the Electoral Register. If this were to be used the sample

would have to be drawn locally but would still need to take account of the likely response rate for each local authority<sup>6</sup>. (For the four surveys of specific service users the sampling frame would almost certainly have to be drawn locally.)

As we have seen response rates for the 2000/01 General Survey varied widely between authorities. It might be difficult to predict response to a national survey asking about local service provision. If a centralised survey were to be given serious consideration, it would be worth carrying out a pilot exercise in selected areas to assess the effect of centralisation on response rates.

### *8.1.3 The BVPI Questions*

In order to be meaningful to respondents some of the BVPI questions would need to include local terms and names for the services and facilities being asked about. The questionnaire might also have to indicate which authority had responsibility for the service or facility. This would require the contractor or DETR to liaise with Local Authorities in order to customise the questionnaire for local residents.

### *8.1.4 The survey mode for a national survey*

If conducted on a national basis the mode of data collection would have to be considered carefully. Running the survey on a face-to-face basis offers the possibility of better data quality and response rates than other survey methods. However, it is unlikely that a single contractor or even a consortium of contractors would have sufficient numbers of trained interviewers for such a large survey if the sampling window were to be kept consistent across the country (or even within the same year). One way round the problem lack of interviewers would be to stagger the fieldwork periods. However fieldwork were organised a national face-to-face survey would be very costly.

A national postal survey is likely to be the most practical option although there are many issues that would need to be considered if acceptable response rates were to be achieved across the country.

A possible alternative that might merit future consideration is the use of telephone surveys. For this particular survey there are however specific technical difficulties that cannot at the moment be overcome. Since there is no sampling frame that lists all domestic telephone numbers - a proportion of landline domestic telephone numbers are ex-directory and an increasing number of people use only mobile telephones - a telephone survey would have to use random digit dialling. The sample of telephone numbers would need to be mapped back to

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<sup>6</sup> Recent changes in legislation also impact on the uses that can be made of the electoral register for research purposes.

Local Authority areas to ensure that there were sufficient respondents in each to allow the results from authorities to be compared. Landline telephone numbers codes can be linked to Local Authority areas but the accuracy of the linking process would need to be investigated. However, it may not be possible to match mobile telephone numbers to Local Authority regions in advance of an interview. In these cases respondents would have to be willing to give their postcode or information about their Local Authority to an interviewer. Postcodes could then be used to map responses on to Local Authority areas. A drawback of this approach is that for the questions to reflect local terms or service provision the interviewer would have to ask the respondent's postcode and match it to the relevant Local Authority (or get the name of the Local Authority) before conducting the rest of the interview. The feasibility of this approach would need to be tested to ensure that respondents were willing and able to give this information at the beginning of an interview and that the information could be used to identify the relevant set of questions to be asked.

Respondents to telephone interviews do not as a rule have access to showcards detailing response categories or variable definitions, and this will have an effect on the topics and questions that can be dealt with adequately by telephone.

In a trial of random digit dialling, conducted two years ago, a national survey organisation, with experience of carrying out surveys for government, achieved a response rate of about 40%. It is unlikely that this level of response could be greatly improved upon.

For the Benefits, Planning and Tenants Surveys a telephone or mixed mode approach to data collection is much more feasible but again would require a lot of co-ordination between authorities and the Department.

### *8.1.5 Other options*

#### *8.1.5.1 Partial centralisation*

An alternative approach to undertaking the surveys centrally would be for DETR to undertake some of the major survey processes - for example sampling and weighting. Drawing a sample for the General Survey would mean using the small users' Postcode Address File (PAF). For the other surveys the Department would have to work with coding frames that only the Authorities could provide. Weighting data centrally is something the Department might usefully investigate further, especially with up to date Census data becoming available for weighting purposes in time for the next survey.

### *8.1.5.2 Recommendation*

There are clear benefits for DETR to be had from undertaking a single national General Survey, with greater control over the methodology being the most compelling arguments in favour. However there are many practical and technical problems associated with a centrally run survey and in order to ensure that these had been dealt with satisfactorily it would be necessary to pilot the survey nationally. A further consideration is that this review suggests that authorities want more ownership of their survey data. Taking responsibility for running the survey away from authorities (or at least distancing them from the process) could have the opposite effect.

The findings of this review suggest that it would be appropriate to refine the existing methods of data collection and only consider a centrally run survey if those refinements do not result in improvements in the consistency of survey methodology.

## **9 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.

### **9.1 Recommendations**

#### *9.1.1 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.

#### *9.1.2 All surveys*

##### *9.1.2.1 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.

### *9.1.2.2 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.

### *9.1.2.3 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.

#### *9.1.2.4 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.

#### *9.1.2.5 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.

#### *9.1.2.6 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.

### 9.1.2.7 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.

## 9.2 General Survey

### 9.2.1 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.

### 9.2.2 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.

### 9.2.3 *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.

## **9.3 Planning Survey**

### 9.3.1 *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.

### 9.3.2 *Questions and questionnaires*

#### 9.3.2.1 *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.

#### 9.3.2.2 *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.

## **9.4 Tenants Survey**

### 9.4.1 *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.

## **9.5 Benefits Survey**

### 9.5.1 *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.'

## **9.6 Libraries Survey**

### *9.6.1 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.