



Report to: Cabinet

Subject: Benefits Satisfaction Survey 2006/07

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The report summarises the main findings from the Best Value Performance Indicators Survey of Housing and Council Tax Benefits Claimants for 2006/07 with comparisons to the 2003/04 survey.

2. BACKGROUND

As part of the Benefits Performance Standards, Gedling Borough Council must regularly review its customer service. This is carried out by survey on a three-year cycle.

Both the 2006/07 and the 2003/04 Surveys were undertaken on our behalf by QCL Market Research Limited. QCL Market Research Limited also undertook this work for a further 29 local authorities in 2006/07.

The 2006/07 Survey involved QCL Market Research Limited issuing 625 questionnaires to claimants, selected from random from two data bases supplied to them by the Council, for two specific waves.

The data base for each wave was made up of claimants who had had a new claim or change of circumstances processed and a benefit entitlement notification letter issued between the following dates: -

For Wave 1 – 1 June 2006 to 31 July 2006

For Wave 2 – 1 November 2006 to 31 December 2006

Once the original questionnaires had been issued, two reminder questionnaires were issued before the data gathering part of the survey ended for each wave.

The waves for the 2003/04 Survey covered the same months as above, but in 2003. The number of questionnaires issued in each wave in the 2003/04 Survey was 650, rather than 625.

3. RESPONSE RATE

The percentage of useable returned questionnaires for each wave of the 2006/07 Survey were as follows: -

Wave 1 - **60%**

Wave 2 - **62%**

In the 2003/04 Survey the percentage of usable returned questionnaires were as follows: -

Wave 1 - 69%

Wave 2 - 64%

4. ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

2003/04		2006/07	Other Authorities Scores		
Gedling		Gedling	Low	Average	High
	Total % Satisfied				
77	Contacting The Office	82	71	81	88
80	Service In The Office	83	70	83	95
71	Telephone Service	69	51	75	89
81	Staff In The Office	83	73	83	90
68	Claims Forms	70	57	64	72
72	Speed Of Decision	75	55	72	84
79	Overall Satisfaction With Service	82	68	80	89
	Response Rate				
69	Wave 1	60	43	55	65
64	Wave 2	62	44	53	67

The above summary table shows a comparison between Gedling's Benefit Claimants Satisfaction Level and those of Benefit Claimants with the 29 other Authorities whose Surveys were undertaken by QCL Market Research Limited.

The full comparisons of the answers are shown in Appendix 1.

The comparisons have been made on the basis of: -

- a) All respondents
- b) Respondents from Black and Ethnic Minorities
- c) Respondents with a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity
- d) The respondents' gender

The latter three comparisons have been made to fulfil part of the work done within Benefits and Gedling 1 Stop to assist the Council in achieving Level 2 of the Equality Standard.

5. INTERPRETATION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

The possible answers to the majority of statements were as follows: -

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree.

In producing the comparison of the answers, we have provided the figures showing the satisfaction with our service in all cases. Depending upon the wording of the statement, in some cases an answer of Strongly Agree or Agree shows satisfaction with our service, whilst in other cases an answer of Disagree or Strongly Disagree shows satisfaction with our service. An example of this is as follows: -

Statement 1.1 – The Benefits Office is somewhere that is easy to get to

This is a statement where we are looking for a positive answer. Therefore we have taken only the answers Strongly Agree and Agree into consideration.

Similar statements are statements; 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 5.1, 5.3, 5.5, 6.1, 6.3, 6.6, 6.7, 7.2, 7.3, 7.5, 8 and 9

Statement 1.2 – The Benefits Office’s opening hours are inconvenient for me

This is a statement where we are looking for a negative answer. Therefore we have taken only the answers Disagree and Strongly Disagree into consideration.

Similar statements are statements; 3.1, 3.4, 5.2, 5.4, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 7.1 and 7.4

This means that in all cases in the answers shown in Appendix 1 we are looking for the percentages to stay the same, or increase, in 2006/07 compared to 2003/04.

6. COMMENTS

Gedling’s benefit claimants’ overall satisfaction with the Council has increased by 3% in 2006/07 compared to 2003/04 and is now above the average satisfaction level over the 30 Councils for whom QCL Market Research Limited undertook this work. Looking at these 30 Councils, Gedling’s benefit claimant satisfaction levels with each aspect of the benefits service is above average or average, with the exception of the telephone service, although the reduction of only 2% is within the tolerance of the survey.

Since June 2003, when the previous survey was undertaken, the Council has begun to transform its customer experience. In this respect, telephony for the benefits service transferred to Gedling 1 Stop in November 2006, during the second wave survey. The Council is aware that its telephony technology is ageing quickly and currently a tendering exercise for the replacement of the Council’s telephone infrastructure is taking place. New telephony, with improved contact centre technology, should be in place for October 2007. This it is anticipated should improve this indicator.

Given that during the last year the Council has replaced its main IT operating systems and introduced document management, which resulted in initial reductions in absolute service performance, improving customer satisfaction against a negative national picture is an excellent result reflecting the Council’s priority of high customer service and the Gedling 1 Stop initiative.

7. FURTHER ACTION POINTS

After analysing the survey results, the following action points for the Council's Benefits Service should further enhance performance: -

- Improved telephony.
- Implementation of IBS Open Access, which allow customers to view their own accounts on-line.
- Introduction of BACS payments should see customers receive Benefits quicker.
- Development of a Benefit take up strategy.
- Implementation of the national Local Housing Allowance Scheme should further simplify the Benefit application system.

These enhancements will complement the rapid improvement in service standards that the Council is now seeing following on from the initial investment in new technology.

8. CONCLUSION

The Council's Benefits Service is maintaining and improving its customer satisfaction levels and has robust plans for further service enhancements.

9. RECOMMENDATION

To note the above report.

Appendix 1

The Statements and Results

The figures in bold in the 06/07 columns in the Results boxes indicate that the level of satisfaction has increased in 2006/07 compared to 2003/04.

Getting in touch with the Benefits Office

- 1.1. The Benefits Office is somewhere that is easy to get to
- 1.2. The Benefits Office's opening hours are inconvenient for me
- 1.3. Staff tried to sort my claim on the phone so I didn't have to go into the office
- 1.4. I was given the name of a person at the Benefits Office to contact about my claim
- 1.5. Overall, I am satisfied with the ways in which I can contact the Benefits Office

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
1.1	69	76	74	67	65	72	73	79	66	74
1.2	54	42	50	42	54	42	56	47	52	38
1.3	47	49	52	48	52	49	47	48	47	50
1.4	34	41	46	46	37	43	41	48	30	36
1.5	77	82	76	77	77	82	80	84	75	80

Comments

The figures for all categories of respondents show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category. It is noted that the percentage of people who disagreed with statement 1.2 fell in 2006/07 suggesting that this is an issue, which may require further consideration. It is noted that whilst on most, if not all, literature that the Council's opening hours are 8:45am, Gedling 1 Stop is open for visitors from 8:00am. If this is more widely publicised, claimants may be able visit the Council, before going to work. The Black and Ethnic Minorities respondents and the Illness and Disability respondents were less satisfied with our attempts to resolve their claims by phone than in 2003/04. This could be due to the requirement to provide evidence in support of their claim, which they could not do by phone. Alternatively, it may be an issue of communication.

Visiting the Benefits Office

2. Did you go to the Benefits Office when you made your most recent claim?

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
Q.2 (Yes)	64	57	50	53	62	55	70	63	61	53

3.1. I had to wait a long time before I saw the person I needed to

3.2. I could talk with this person in a private place if I wanted to

3.3. The Benefits Office was “clean and tidy”

3.4. More seats are needed in the Benefits Office

3.5. Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of visiting the Benefits Office

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
3.1	70	69	69	64	73	69	74	67	67	71
3.2	60	73	67	77	61	72	63	78	58	68
3.3	94	94	93	100	93	93	95	94	93	93
3.4	28	25	17	21	31	25	35	28	24	23
3.5	80	83	75	88	81	82	84	85	77	82

Comments

In 2003/04 visits to the Council's Benefits Office would have been undertaken by visiting the pilot One Stop Shop, which was in place at the end of the mall between the Benefits and Council Tax Offices. In 2006/07 visits to the Council's Benefits Office are undertaken by visiting Gedling 1 Stop.

The figures for all categories of respondents show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category. The introduction of Gedling 1 Stop brought with it three closed interview rooms to enable claimants to deal with matters in private. In 2003/04, there was only one private secure interview room. It is noted that the percentage of people who disagreed with statements 3.1 and 3.4 fell in 2006/07

suggesting that this is an issue, which may require more resources in terms of staff being allocated to Gedling 1 Stop and a re-design of the waiting area to incorporate more seats. However if the waiting time issue is resolved, the seating issue may, in part, resolve itself.

Telephoning the Benefits Office

4. Did you telephone the Benefits Office when you made your most recent claim?

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
Q.4 (Yes)	35	38	61	43	35	38	29	33	38	42

5.1. The telephone call I made to the Benefits Office was answered quickly

5.2. When I made a call to the Benefits Office I was transferred between several different people

5.3. Once the call was answered my query was dealt with swiftly

5.4 When I called the Benefits Office it was difficult to speak to the right member of staff

5.5. Overall, I am satisfied with the telephone service provided by the Benefits Office

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
5.1	71	66	64	64	76	68	78	71	68	63
(W 1)		63		25		67		71		57
(W 2)		69		86		69		70		68
5.2	44	50	18	45	43	49	41	50	46	51
(W 1)		47		50		48		52		44
(W 2)		53		28		51		48		57
5.3	68	66	81	55	73	68	71	69	66	64
(W 1)		64		25		64		70		59
(W 2)		69		71		73		68		69
5.4	56	55	50	50	57	53	55	56	56	55

(W 1)		53		50		54		60		49
(W 2)		57		50		53		51		61
5.5	70	69	68	67	74	69	74	70	69	69
(W 1)		67		60		65		71		64
(W 2)		72		71		73		69		74

Comments

Under the answers to each question in the above table, the answers are then broken down between the two waves (W1 and W2).

In 2003/04 telephone calls to the Benefits Office were answered within the main Benefits Office. Virtually every member of staff would have had a telephone on their desk meaning that more calls could be answered at the same time. In 2006/07, during the period when Wave 1 respondents would have telephoned the Council's Benefits Office, calls were being answered in a separate Benefits Office and not the main Benefits Office. During the period when Wave 2 respondents would have telephoned the Council's Benefits Office, calls will have been answered in the Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre. During Wave 2 the Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre would have had only two dedicated Benefits lines. They therefore would not take the volume of calls that were being answered in 2003/04.

The figures for all categories of respondents show a decrease in overall satisfaction in this category. It is noted that the percentage of people who disagreed with statement 5.2 increased in 2006/07, which indicated that more staff are able to deal with all aspect of a call they take. This does not only apply to the Contact Centre but also to the fact that more staff within the Benefits and Council Tax Offices have acquired knowledge regarding the other service. This has been acquired through IRRV courses, internal training and staff in one office having had previous experience in the other. There is no pattern to the results between Wave 1 and Wave 2. The Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre had only been in operation for a few weeks before the claimants were selected to receive a questionnaire for Wave 2.

From 1 January 2007 (after Wave 2 had ended) the five telephonists in the Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre operated on a generic basis.

The Council are currently in the process of replacing the telephony system, which should be completed during the course of this financial year.

The staff in the Benefits Office

- 6.1. Staff in the Benefits Office were friendly
- 6.2. I wasn't always confident that what the staff said was correct
- 6.3. Things were explained in a way that I could understand
- 6.4. I felt unable to ask the questions I wanted to
- 6.5. Staff were in a rush
- 6.6. Staff treated me with respect
- 6.7. Overall, I am satisfied with the service provided by the Benefits Office

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
6.1	87	89	84	76	89	89	89	91	85	87
6.2	48	43	37	44	48	44	51	43	47	43
6.3	79	75	68	64	77	74	81	79	78	73
6.4	69	68	58	79	68	69	68	70	70	66
6.5	75	72	67	57	74	73	78	76	74	69
6.6	81	84	87	79	85	87	86	88	79	81
6.7	81	83	79	78	81	84	84	85	80	81

Comments

In 2003/04 claimants would have been dealt with by staff operating the pilot One Stop Shop, which was in place at the end of the mall between the Benefits and Council Tax Offices. In 2006/07 claimants would have been dealt with by staff from Gedling 1 Stop.

Whilst the figures for all categories of respondents, with the exception of Black and Ethnic Minorities, show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category, it is noted that on certain questions the satisfaction level with the staff in the Office has fallen with the most of the categories of respondents.

The forms you fill in to claim benefits

- 7.1. The Housing/Council Tax Benefits claim form was difficult to fill in
- 7.2. I could fill in the form quickly
- 7.3. The information that came with the form was helpful
- 7.4. The letters they sent about my claim were difficult to understand
- 7.5. Overall, I am satisfied with the Housing/Council Tax Benefits claim form

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
7.1	46	49	34	38	42	44	44	48	48	50
7.2	46	46	36	39	42	40	45	44	47	47
7.3	63	64	60	64	61	63	64	67	62	62
7.4	55	47	62	39	54	43	57	46	54	48
7.5	69	70	60	70	68	67	69	70	68	70

Comments

Almost all the categories of respondents show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category. The standard claim form is based on a national model claim form and we also have shortened forms for changes in circumstances, such as change of address, change of income etc. All categories of respondents find our benefit notification letters more difficult to understand. Over the past 18 months, following the introduction of the new IBS computer system, our notification letters have changed. They are now longer, as we have separate letters for both Housing and Council Tax Benefit. The letters give claimants more information. However it may be that the number of pages that a letter can consist of deters some claimants from reading it thoroughly. When it is known that a letter containing a number of pages is to be issued, staff will sometimes produce a covering letter summarising the changes. It may be that such a summary letter should be produced more often, however this would result in a member of staff spending more time on a specific claim. It appears that it is not possible to produce a single page summary of the benefit entitlement calculation, as used to be produced on the old Northgate computer system. In the past few months the notification letters have been revised and it is felt that these revisions have made the letters more understandable. Feedback has been received stating that these letters have now improved. It has been pointed out that on the benefit notification letters we do not state that the letters are available in other formats. This is something that we should give consideration to doing.

Overall Service

8. How satisfied were you with the amount of time it took to tell you whether your claim was successful?

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
Q.8	72	75	60	67	75	75	72	76	72	75

Comments

The figures for all categories of respondents show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category.

9. Taking everything into account how satisfied were you with the service you received from the Benefits Office?

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
Q.9	79	82	71	79	80	82	79	84	79	80

Comments

The figures for all categories of respondents show an increase in overall satisfaction in this category.

10. Was your claim successful or unsuccessful?

	Overall		Black & Ethnic Minorities		Illness and Disability		Male		Female	
	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07	03/04	06/07
Q.10 (Successful)	95	91	86	72	96	93	93	93	96	90

11. Thinking about the overall service you receive from the Benefits Office, which one of the list below do you think needs most improving?

- The ways in which I can contact the Benefits Office
- The experience of visiting the Benefits Office
- The telephone service provided by the Benefits Office
- The staff service provided by the Benefits Office
- The Housing/Council Tax Benefits claim form
- The time it takes to tell me whether my claim for Housing/Council Tax Benefit was successful
- Other
- Nothing
- Don't Know

2006/07

	Overall	Black & Ethnic Minorities	Illness and Disability	Male	Female
Ways of Contact	4	7	6	5	4
Visiting Experience	5	3	6	6	5
Telephone Service	10	13	10	7	11
Staff Service	7	3	7	5	7
Claim Form	18	27	21	17	19
Time to Notify Decision	22	37	18	20	23
Other	6	7	6	5	6
None of These	29	20	28	33	27
Don't Know	6	7	6	8	5
No Reply	3	3	4	3	3

2003/04

	Overall	Black & Ethnic Minorities	Illness and Disability	Male	Female
Ways of Contact	5	17	5	7	4
Visiting Experience	6	6	7	7	5
Telephone Service	6	11	6	6	6
Staff Service	6	22	5	5	7
Claim Form	22	36	27	25	20
Time to Notify Decision	25	22	22	24	25
Other	4	3	3	2	5
None of These	27	14	29	30	25
Don't Know	8		8	8	8
No Reply	3	3	3	2	3

Comments

The figures for all categories of respondents show an increase in the percentage who say that the telephone service is in need of most improvement between the 2006/07 Survey and the 2003/04 Survey. The claim form and the time taken to notify a claimant of the decision on their claim are still the two highest percentages for all categories of respondents in terms of what is in need of most improvement. These percentages have reduced in 2006/07 compared to 2003/04, which indicates changes have been made in these areas.