

CORPORATE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

3 FEBRUARY 2005

APPENDIX 'E'

**BEST VALUE REVIEW
OF
REVENUES AND BENEFITS**

Revenues and Benefits Best Value Improvement Plan 2005

Challenge No	Challenge	Recommended action	Target Date	Date completed
1.	Should customers be offered more than one payment date?	The Council should continue to offer only one payment date of 1 st of the month.	No change	Not applicable
2.	Are the current payment methods offered cost effective and in line with customer requirements?	From the survey it has been concluded that the current payment methods offered are satisfactory and in line with the requirements of the public.	No change	Not applicable
3.	Is the provision of a free to customers Post Office service for Council Tax payments, which is currently funded by the Council, no longer necessary considering the increasing number of bank accounts as a result of state pensions and benefits being paid by BACS?	<p>Contact residents in the.....closed post office.....locations, who are cash payers, to promote future payment by Direct Debit.</p> <p>Promote Direct Debit by sending a representative of the Council Tax section to accompany the Benefit section when future visits are arranged to local Day Centres.</p> <p>Continue to pay the Post Office transaction charge but remove during 2005/06 giving customers adequate warning of the change.</p> <p>Review the use of cash instalment payment booklets.</p>	<p>By 28th February 2005</p> <p>Commence by 31st January 2005</p> <p>By 31st March 2006.</p> <p>By 31st December 2005.</p>	

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		Commence charge of 1.55% per transaction for all credit card payments to the council.	By March 2006 at the latest.	
4.	Should customers be offered early payment discounts?	Due to the majority of those surveyed saying no to early payment discount and the general rejection of a 1.5% discount recommend that no discount be offered.	No change	Not applicable
5.	Would cash flow be improved by sending reminders to defaulters including an instalment due within the next 7 days, e.g. if an instalment due 1 st April is unpaid a reminder would be sent on 25 th April which would include a reminder for the next instalment due on 1 st May?	Continue the current practice of sending reminders but not including an instalment if it is due within 7 days.	No change	Not applicable
6.	Would cash flow be improved if the Council reminded defaulters earlier than the current 25 day requirement on Council Tax and the 18 day requirement on Business Rates, after the instalment due dates?	Conduct reminder runs for Council Tax on the 20 th of the month from 20 th April 2005. Conduct reminder runs for Business Rates on the 15 th of the month from 15 th April 2005.	Commence 20 th April 2005 Commence 15 th April 2005	
7.	Does the level of Summons and Liability Order costs charged for defaulting on payment cover the Council's cost of	Apply to the Magistrates Court for increases in the costs charged: Council Tax costs: £55.00	By 31 st January 2005	

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	administration?	Business Rates costs £100.00 Investigate the viability of splitting costs between the issue of the Summons and obtaining the Liability Order for both Council Tax and Business Rates and apply to Magistrates Court if applicable.	By 31 st January 2006	
8.	Has the Benefits Service completed its self assessment against the DWP/BFI Performance Standards and produced an improvement plan?	A copy of the of the plan to be placed on the Members' web site and updated regularly until it has been completed.	On Members web site by 31 st January 2005	
9.	Complaints are a good thing as they can highlight poor service or operational procedures. Are complaints about service or staff monitored and taken seriously enough for remedial action to be taken whenever required?	The system for recording and reacting to complaints is adequate. No changes required.	No change	Not applicable
10.	Is the system in the Civic Offices for customers to make complaints adequate?	The system for customer complaints in the Civic Offices is believed to be adequate. However, customers who make a complaint will be asked if they are satisfied with the system for making a complaint. Changes will be applied if it is determined that there are weaknesses in the process.	Prepare customer response form and commence usage by 31 st January 2005	

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11.	Benefit notification of entitlement letters are long and complex, which makes them more difficult to understand. What can be done to make them more comprehensible?	Implement the new notification letters by 31 st March 2005. Once in use, the Benefits Service will monitor customer responses and make changes as required.	Commence usage of new notification letters by 31 st March 2005. Monitor and record customer responses for changes as required.	
12.	Are customers dealt with quickly and efficiently at the benefits reception in the Civic Offices with a minimum of "hand offs"?	Customers are generally dealt with quickly and efficiently. However, attention will be paid to dealing more quickly with customers who do not have a pre-booked appointment to determine where the problems lie, take action and improve the response rate to at least the target level.	Bring to target by 31 st March 2005	
13.	Is it possible for customers to apply for benefits over the telephone as they do for Pension Credit?	Not possible within current budgets. However, make the application form interactive on the Council's web site by 31 st March 2005.	Interactive benefit application form on web site by 31 st March 2005	
14.	Retention of Benefits staff is difficult because of the high value placed upon their services by other Local Authorities. Should more staff be permitted to work from home to help with staff retention?	It is not believed that home working is needed as a means of retaining staff at this time.	No change	Not applicable

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15. Revenues	Will staff be consulted on the level and quality of service provided as part of the consultation process of this Best Value review?	Evaluate and implement appropriate staff suggestions.	By 30 th June 2005	
15. Benefits	Will staff be consulted on the level and quality of service provided as part of the consultation process of this BV review?	Evaluate and implement appropriate staff suggestions.	By 30 th June 2005	
16. Revenues	Increase the extent by which the services can be accessed electronically, including the introduction of on-line forms.	Determine which forms are appropriate and include in the web site when an acceptable electronic signature is available.	Ongoing	Ongoing
16. Benefits	Increase the extent by which the service can be accessed electronically, including the introduction of on-line forms.	Maintain the Benefits web site keeping it up-to-date with the latest information on changes and developments.	Ongoing	Ongoing
17. Revenues	Use benchmarking data to improve the quality of the services.	Continue to monitor performance and best practices, with the objective of achieving steady improvement year-on-year in Council Tax collection and maintenance of the current high position of Business Rates, in comparison with other authorities.	Ongoing	Ongoing
17. Benefits	Use benchmarking data to improve the quality of the services.	Continue current benchmarking exercises.	Ongoing	Ongoing

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<p>18. Revenues</p>	<p>Review service levels and quality levels in the light of consultation.</p>	<p>It not believed that a review of service and quality levels is required at this time. However, continue to regularly monitor and measure service delivery and performance looking to improve wherever possible for better collection rates and customer service.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<p>18. Benefits</p>	<p>Review service levels and quality levels in the light of consultation.</p>	<p>The Benefits Service will aim to maintain and, where possible, improve its performance and general standards of service delivery.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

At the Best Value Challenge Workshop held on 8th March 2004 a number of issues were raised that required investigation. In the main, questions raised have been answered as a result of Council Tax & National Non Domestic Rates (Business Rates) customer surveys.

4500 Council Tax payers were chosen at random and received survey forms. 1125 forms were returned giving a return rate of 25%. An additional 57 forms were returned incomplete and could not be processed. See Appendix 4 for details and conclusions of the complete survey.

Council Tax payers have used the survey to air grievances and problems experienced with a number of other sections in the Council; this point is highlighted in Appendix 4. Unfortunately this has inflated the satisfied/dissatisfied markings; the majority of the latter appearing to relate to other services.

274 Business Rate payers were chosen at random and sent survey forms and 78 were returned (28%). See Appendix 6 for details and conclusions of the complete survey.

A questionnaire was sent to the other Surrey Authorities in order that comparisons could be made in specific areas. See Appendix 6 for the results of the comparisons between Runnymede and those that responded.

Revenues staff have been consulted on matters raised at the Challenge Meeting and their opinions where sought on other matters.

CHALLENGE NO. 1

Should customers be offered more than one payment date?

Response:

See Question 1 of Appendix 4.

The survey showed that 13.4% said Yes and 86.6% said No.

It is estimated that a choice of more than one payment date would add £1 to the Council Tax bills.

Recommendation:

That the Council should continue to offer only one payment date of 1st of the month.

CHALLENGE NO. 2

Are the current payment methods offered cost effective and in line with customer requirements?

Response:

See Questions 4e and 4f of Appendix 4 and Question 1 of Appendix 5.

Current payment methods are as follows:

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- Direct Debit (actively promoted)
- Payment by Telephone (Interactive Voice Response facility 24 hours a day)
- On Line Payment (via the Council's secure internet site by credit and debit cards)
- Bankers Order (not actively promoted)
- In person at the Civic Offices
- By phoning the Cash Office or Council Tax office directly and paying by credit/debit card
- By posting in a payment to the Civic Offices
- Payment at a Bank
- Payment at the Post Office
- Payment by BACS/CHAPS
- By using your Banks Internet Service

Costs to the Council in 2003/2004 for payment methods were as follows:
(These are transaction costs only and do not include any other cost factors)

	Per Transaction	Annual Cost	No of Transactions
Direct Debit:	2p	£ 3,944	197,267
At Post Office:	78p	£15,942	20,439
At Cash Office	99p	£37,765	34,387
Debit Card:	18.5p	£ 693	3,746
Credit Card	1.55%	£ 8,920	2,483

For payments made through banks, other than the Co-operative bank, and via BACS/CHAPS the costs are met by the customer.

For the year 2003/2004 it cost the Council £15,085 to enable customers to pay their Council Tax at the Post Office. At a cost of 78p per transaction this is the third most expensive method of collection for the Council after payment by credit card (average £3.59 per transaction) and through the Cash Office (99p) and is significantly higher than the cost of Direct Debit.

The Council Tax survey asked for suggestions on alternative payment methods. This resulted in three suggestions of introducing half yearly payments and one of quarterly payments. No other suggestions were made that are not already available.

The Administration and Enforcement Regulations prescribe that Council Tax is payable by ten monthly instalments. Although there is no statutory obligation to offer yearly and half yearly payments, the Council accepts payment of 10 instalments together for yearly payments and payment of 5 instalments together for half yearly payments. Information regarding this is contained both in the Council Tax leaflet and payment books.

No additional payment methods were requested by Business Rates payers that are not already offered.

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation:

From the survey it has been concluded that the current payment methods offered are satisfactory and in line with what the public and businesses require.

Paying the transaction fee for payers who make payment at the Post Office is not cost effective but does meet customer requirements. However, there may be a natural decline if the Post Office continues to close more local offices with customers turning to other payment methods over time.

CHALLENGE NO. 3

Is the provision of a free to customers Post Office service for Council Tax payments, which is currently funded by the Council, no longer necessary considering the increasing number of bank accounts as a result of state pensions and benefits being paid by BACS?

Response:

See Questions 4a, 4b and 4c of Appendix 4 and Appendix 6.

Of the other Surrey Councils that responded, Elmbridge and Tandridge pay the transaction fee for payments made through the Post Office.

The Council Tax survey showed that **6.9%** of those that completed the Council Tax Survey currently pay at the Post Office. **56.3%** said they would pay by Direct Debit if the facility to pay at the Post Office ceased.

The government is currently in the process of changing the payment of state pensions and benefits through books and giros to BACS transfer directly into customers' bank accounts. The requirement to have a bank account will enable more customers to pay their bills by Direct Debit. A reason often given by customers, particularly older customers, for not using this payment method has been that they do not possess bank accounts. This should generally not be the case in the future and will lessen the need for people to pay through the Post Office.

It is not the Council's intention to follow suit with Housing Benefit payments at present. However, a pilot scheme to pay landlords Housing Benefit by BACS will be undertaken shortly with the eventual aim of paying most customers by BACS transfer. When pensions and Housing Benefit are largely paid by BACS it will be easier to promote the payment of Council Tax by Direct Debit.

Post Office Ltd is currently restructuring its network of post office branches to provide a sustainable framework for future service provision. In some instances it will mean closing branches, in other areas it will require their relocation. As part of the review, interested parties are invited to comment on the restructuring. Within the borough of Runnymede four local Post Offices have already been closed. These were located in Bond Street (Englefield Green), Woodham Lane (New Haw) and Marsh Lane (in Green Lane, Addlestone). Little Green Lane (Chertsey) was destroyed by fire.

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation:

This could be the ideal time to contact residents in the above locations, who are cash payers, to promote future payment by Direct Debit.

Promote Direct Debit by sending a representative of the Council Tax section to accompany the Benefit section when future visits are arranged to local Day Centres.

Revenues Officers actively promote Direct Debit as the preferred method of payment. It is intended that more people should pay by Direct Debit but it appears to have reached the optimum number as it has fluctuated around the 68% level for several years. This is believed to be due partially to the continued availability of the free to customer Post Office facility. It is recommended at this time to continue to pay the transaction charge in the meantime but to prepare customers for the removal of the free Post Office service from April 2006 and to promote Direct Debit as the main alternative. By then more customers should have bank accounts. Removing the free Post Office service will save in excess of £15,000 per annum in Post Office charges. At the same time, the continued necessity for cash instalment payment booklets will be reviewed to look at cheaper and equally convenient alternatives, e.g. payment cards as currently used for council rent collection.

A rising number of credit card transactions is increasing the annual cost of collection of both council tax and business rates. The cost of credit card transactions for 2003/04 for these services rose to £8,920 from £6,169 in 2002/03; a 45% increase. There were 2,483 council tax and business rates payments by credit card in 2003/04 compared to 1,994 in 2002/03; a 25% increase. It is likely that this trend will continue, especially with the proposed removal of the free Post Office facility. Most of the responding boroughs in Surrey currently charge for credit card transactions or are considering charging at some point in the near future. It is proposed, therefore, to pass on to customers the 1.55% fee charged to the Council for every credit card transaction. This charge would commence at some point during 2005/06 after the necessary amendments have been made to the PARIS cash receipting system. Customers would be informed of the impending change in information contained with their 2005/06 council tax and business rates bills and given adequate warning of when the charge is to commence in that year. Direct Debit will be offered as the most practical alternative for those people who do not want to pay the fee. There will be an initial cost of approximately £1,000 (to be confirmed) to modify PARIS to accommodate the change but, thereafter, there will be a minimum annual saving of £9,000.

To ensure that council taxpayers and business rates payers are not singled out for payment of the fee, it is also proposed that the credit card fee should be applied universally across the council on all credit card transactions, regardless of which council service/facility the card is being used to pay for, e.g. rents, sundry debts etc. This would save another £1,100 per annum as a minimum.

It was determined at the Business Management Review Board on 21st September 2000 that the continued provision of a Cash Office reflects the Council's aspirations for the provision of this service. However, a payment made through the Cash Office in the Civic Offices is the second most expensive cost per

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transaction after credit cards and is significantly more expensive than Direct Debit. In light of this cost and the Council's current Financial Strategy savings targets, the Cashiering and Income Control Service is a potential service for examination towards meeting the targets concerned.

CHALLENGE NO 4

Should customers be offered early payment discounts?

See Questions 2 and 3 of Appendix 4.

Response:

The council tax customer survey showed that **34.2%** said **No** and **65.8%** said **Yes**. A discount of 1.5% was suggested in the survey because this is the maximum rate which could be offered without the Council incurring a net cost on the arrangements. **71.18%** of payers did not think that 1.5% would be enough to encourage people to the pay full annual amount by 1st April each year. **28.2%** thought it would.

None of the other responding Surrey Authorities give discounts for yearly payments made on or before 1st April.

Recommendation:

In the light of the response to the questionnaire, it is thought that a discount of 1.5% is unlikely to attract many people to make annual payment in advance. The concern is that this will add to the Council's costs because the only people taking advantage of the offer will be those people who already pay in advance.

CHALLENGE NO. 5

Would cash flow be improved by sending reminders to defaulters including an instalment due within the next 7 days, e.g. if an instalment due 1st April is unpaid a reminder would be sent on 25th April which would include a reminder for the next instalment due on 1st May?

Response:

See Appendix 6.

Out of the 7 authorities that completed the survey, 2 include the instalment due within the next 7 days but the majority do not. In 2003/2004 Surrey Heath, Waverley and Epsom & Ewell had the highest collection rates out of the Surrey authorities for Council Tax but none of these Councils returned the benchmarking questionnaire.

The Administration and Enforcement Regulations allow for Reminder notices to include the next instalment if due within the next 7 days of the notice being produced. This practice has been tried out a number of times in the past and it had a negative effect on customer relations. Revenues staff found it very difficult to justify to the public that this was good practice and was indeed legal. It proved very unpopular with the staff as well as the public. The majority of Surrey councils that returned the questionnaire do not use this practice.

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation:

Continue the current practice of sending a reminder and not include an instalment if due within 7 days.

CHALLENGE NO. 6

Would cash flow be improved if the Council reminded defaulters earlier than the current 25 day requirement on Council Tax and the 18 day requirement on Business Rates, after the instalment due dates?

Response:

See Appendix 6.

Runnymede's current practice is to send reminder notices for Council Tax no earlier than 24 days after the instalment was due, i.e. a notice can be sent on the 25th of the month (instalments are due on the 1st of the month).

For Business Rates a Reminder notice is not sent earlier than 17 days after the instalment was due, i.e. a notice can be sent on the 18th of the month (instalments are due on 1st of the month).

For the collection of Council Tax the survey showed that Runnymede remind later than all the other authorities apart from Elmbridge and Reigate & Banstead, who then also include the next instalment due. Certainly all other authorities have a better collection rate. Elmbridge and Mole Valley were joint third nationally for Council Tax collection in 2003/2004.

For Business Rates the survey showed that again Elmbridge and Reigate & Banstead are the only Surrey Authorities to include the instalment due within the next 7 days. Some councils reminded earlier whilst others later in the month. Amongst the Surrey authorities, Runnymede came joint 1st in 2003/2004 with Spelthorne for Business Rates collection. Cash collection might be increased if the Reminder date was brought forward to the 15th of the month.

Recommendation:

Conduct reminder runs for Council Tax on the 20th of the month from 20th April 2005. Conduct reminder runs for Business Rates on the 15th of the month from 15th April 2005.

CHALLENGE NO. 7

Does the level of Summons and Liability Order costs charged for defaulting on payment cover the Council's cost of administration?

Response:

See Appendix 6.

The survey shows that Runnymede's costs for Council Tax are less than all the other authorities surveyed. It also showed that this authority is the only one that does not charge costs for the issue of the Summons but only for the granting of the Liability Order.

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Business Rates costs for Runnymede proved to be in the middle range. Again, all other Surrey authorities made a substantial charge for the issue of the Summons.

Costs were last reviewed in August 1999. Using similar methodology as then, the levels charged by Runnymede do not currently cover the cost of administration.

There is a strong argument for splitting the charges as most of the work is undertaken during the summoning stage. Some defaulting council tax and business rate payers wait until they receive the summons and then pay in full. Under the current system, if they pay in full, the summons is withdrawn and they escape the costs incurred. However, there is a concern amongst Revenues staff about the collection of summons costs from people who pay in full upon receiving the summons. If it is not paid, the question remains on whether a liability order should then be sought for non-payment of the summons costs as well as the liability order costs. Some preliminary research shows that, in other boroughs, people pay the summons costs when paying in full. However, it is not possible to determine if that would be repeated in Runnymede as defaulters are used to waiting and then paying in full and may refuse to pay the summons costs. There may then be additional work for the staff with the difficulties of recovering relatively small amounts of money. Currently, debts of less than the value of the costs outstanding are not referred to

Bailiffs. This procedure would need to be reviewed if unpaid costs were to be actively pursued.

Recommendation:

It is believed that splitting costs at this stage would cause additional work for Revenues staff with payers disputing the payment of summons costs. For this reason, it is recommended that more research be undertaken on the effect of cost splitting and, if merited, introduce it from April 2006. In the interim, the Revenues Service should apply to the Magistrates Court for increases in the amounts charged overall for costs, as follows, as they have not been reviewed since 1999:

Council Tax costs:	£55.00
Business Rates costs	£100.00

QUESTIONS RAISED COMMON TO ALL SERVICES

CHALLENGE NO. 15

Will staff be consulted on the level and quality of service provided as part of the consultation process of this Best Value review?

Response:

Staff have been consulted and the results will be analysed for comments and suggestions for best practice. Examples coming from staff include:

- the Council should offer a second payment date for direct debit payers only
- a 1.5% early payment discount would not encourage early payment of council tax

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

- charging for credit card payments would deter people from paying that way
- need more training on the roles of the Bailiffs
- provide more information for customers in Reception
- add information on recovery procedures to web site

Recommendation

Evaluate and implement appropriate staff suggestions.

CHALLENGE NO. 16

Increase the extent by which the sections' services can be accessed electronically, including the introduction of on-line forms.

Response:

As mentioned previously, payment of Council Tax and Business Rates can be made on line by credit/debit cards. Payment can also be made directly by telephone using the Council's Interactive Voice Response facility. Both Direct Debit Instructions and Standing Orders are available on-line. All the necessary forms are currently available and downloadable from the web site. As most of the forms are relatively short (1-2 pages) interactive forms will only be possible when the issue of electronic signatures has been resolved corporately. Until then, it is believed that the provision of downloadable forms is adequate.

A "frequently asked questions" section based on the most commonly asked customer questions/queries will be added to the Council Tax web site.

Recommendation

Both web sites to be reviewed on a regular basis and amended as required. Interactive forms to be made available when the corporate issue of acceptable electronic signatures has been resolved.

CHALLENGE NO. 17

Use benchmarking data to improve the quality of the services.

Response:

The Council Tax Service was 74th out of 238 in the English collection tables for 2003/04 which compared favourably with 132nd the year before. In relation to Surrey Councils Runnymede Council Tax Service was joint 11th with Spelthorne out of 11 in 2003/04 and was in the same position the year before. Runnymede collected 98.3% of the council tax debit in 2003/04 compared to the top performing Surrey council at 99.6%.

Council Tax staff take their position in the tables very seriously and the methods of some of the other Surrey authorities have been studied to determine why they achieve better results. Generally, they do not appear to do anything radically different from Runnymede. One possible reason is that the services are not being compared equally due to differing ways of determining collection rates. It is known, for example, that one local authority does not issue any refunds during January

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

February and March, thereby artificially inflating its collection figures for the year. Despite discussions with and visits to other boroughs, the Revenues Service has so far been unable to come to any firm conclusions in respect of better practices conducted by neighbouring boroughs, except for the recommendation made for Challenge No 6. However, Runnymede Revenues managers will continue to discuss best practice and exchange ideas with managers in other boroughs to determine how they achieve their results.

It is acknowledged that the Council's policy aim is to seek sustained top performance for all its services and that that is currently not being achieved by the Council Tax Service (currently in the second quartile of English Authorities). There has been steady improvement in collection performance each year and at the time of drafting this report collection was ahead of target for 2004/05. Council Tax staff follow tried and tested procedures and endeavour at all times to maximise their collection performance. Setting annual targets is gradually resulting in improvement and it is believed that Runnymede's collection rate will move into the top quartile of performance.

The Business Rates service is one of the best in the country. In 2002/03 its collection rate was the highest in the UK at 99.96%. Last year that dropped to eighth at 99.6% but this was believed to be due to some large refunds being issued in the latter weeks of the year. For each of those two years it has been first in Surrey.

Business Rates staff strive to achieve the best possible collection rate whilst maintaining the excellent relationship that exists with the majority of ratepayers in the borough. Generally, they are very successful at achieving that aim.

It should be remembered that the above collection figures are the in-year figures. Collection of outstanding council tax and business rates continues into the new year and subsequent years. Taking into account the recovery of arrears after the year end, Runnymede collects over 99.6% of the Council Tax that is due.

The above are primarily performance benchmarking. There are no published comparators for quality, e.g. on correspondence replies, telephone answering etc.

Recommendation

Continue to monitor performance and seek best practices, with the objective of achieving steady improvement year-on-year in Council Tax collection and maintenance of the current high position of Business Rates in comparison with other authorities.

CHALLENGE NO 18

Review service levels and quality levels in the light of consultation.

Response:

From the surveys conducted, it would appear that the quality of service provided by both the Council Tax Service and the Business Rates Service is high. It can be seen from the survey results that the vast majority of negative responses actually relate to other services (some of which are not the responsibility of the Council).

REVENUES SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation

It is not believed that a review of service and quality levels is required at this time. However, the Revenues Service will continue to regularly monitor and measure its service delivery and performance looking to improve collection rates and customer service wherever possible.

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Challenge No. 8

Has the Benefits Service completed its self assessment against the DWP/BFI Performance Standards and produced an Improvement Plan?

Response

The self-assessment has been completed and an Improvement Plan produced to help raise standards in the delivery of the Benefits Service.

Recommendation

A copy of the Plan will be placed on the Members' web site and will be updated regularly until it has been completed.

Challenge No. 9

Complaints are a good thing as they can highlight poor service or operational procedures. Are complaints about service or staff monitored and taken seriously enough for remedial action to be taken whenever required?

Response

Complaints are taken very seriously in the Benefits Service. When written complaints are received they are identified by the Director of Finance as a complaint and entered onto a complaints register. To date, the Benefit Service has a 100% record in responding to complaints within target time. The Assistant Director of Finance (Revenues & Benefits) and the Benefits & Customer Services Manager review each complaint and remedial action is taken when required. Individual complainants are then sent a personal reply detailing the remedial action taken, and an apology if required, or the reasons why it is believed that their complaint is unfounded. Where a problem in procedures or operations is identified as a consequence of receiving the complaint, steps are taken to ensure that the problem is not repeated. In cases where changes have been implemented as a result of complaints, to date, no further complaints have been received for the same reasons.

Where breaches of procedure or operation have occurred they are raised at the weekly Benefits team meeting to ensure that all staff are aware of the problem to prevent it from being repeated. This is documented in the minutes of the meetings and managers ensure that that staff are trained on any resultant new procedures when required.

Recommendation

The system for recording and reacting to complaints is adequate. No changes required.

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Challenge No 10

Is the system in the Civic Offices for customers to make complaints adequate?

Response

Official complaints forms for both the Council's complaint procedure and the Ombudsman are available at the reception desk in the Civic Offices. Customer Comment forms are also available at reception for callers to make comments about the service they have received. In addition, a feedback form is offered after every appointment with a Benefits Adviser.

All comments are taken seriously and dealt with appropriately.

Recommendation

The system for customer complaints in the Civic Offices is believed to be adequate. However, customers who make a complaint will be asked if they are satisfied with the system for making a complaint. Changes will be applied if it is determined that there are weaknesses in the process.

Challenge No 11

Benefit notification of entitlement letters are long and complex, which makes them more difficult to understand. What can be done to make them more comprehensible?

Response

The content of the benefit notification letters is stipulated under Schedule 6 of the Housing Benefit (General) Regulations 1987. The Benefits Service is aware of the difficulties with understanding the letters and, as a consequence, has been sending an explanation of the content with all entitlement letters since November 2002.

As a result of persistent lobbying, by this Council and others, of the software supplier (Sx3) over a number of years, a new suite of notification letters has now been made available. These were developed by the a specially formed Project Group of current users of the computer system. It is believed that the letters will be a significant improvement on the current letters and will be easier for customers to understand. Regrettably, at the stage of drafting this report, the Benefits Service has been unable to get the new letters working and has been consulting the IT Department and the supplier for an early resolution.

The new letters have a better layout and are more easily understood. However, the font is quite small and Sx3 system users have been informed that this cannot be changed due to the nature of their design. The CAB has been consulted on the new letters and feedback was favourable, apart from the small font which may cause problems for partially sighted customers. Solutions to this problem are currently being investigated.

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation

Implement the new notification letters by 31st March 2005. Once in use, the Benefits Service will monitor and record customer responses and make changes to the letters where possible.

Challenge No 12

Are customers dealt with quickly and efficiently at the benefits reception in the Civic Offices with a minimum of "hand offs"

Response

Surveys are conducted each month to monitor the times that customers have to wait to be seen. The surveys include all visitors to the Housing and Finance reception.

The results of the last survey were as follows:

94% of callers were seen and dealt with by the Receptionist within 15 minutes of arrival time (**target = 80%**).

An experienced officer saw **88%** within 15 minutes of arrival if they had a pre-booked appointment. (**target = 80%**)

An experienced officer saw **71%** within 30 minutes of arrival if they did not have a pre-booked appointment. (**target = 80%**)

Receptionists are trained to provide basic benefit information. Benefits Advisers are available by appointment to see customers for more complex or lengthy enquiries.

The above figures include callers for Housing Advice/Management as well as Benefits as the reception is combined for Finance and Housing. Separate data will be kept in future which will allow a distinction between the two Departments. This will show if there are problems relevant to one or both that need to be addressed.

The recent Alexi Marmot Associates visitor survey showed that the average wait to be seen at the Treasurers and Housing Reception was 13.5 minutes.

Recommendation

In general, visitors are dealt with quickly and efficiently. However, attention will need to be paid to dealing more quickly with customers who do not have a pre-booked appointment. It will be determined where the problems lie and action will be taken to ensure that customers are dealt with within target in future.

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Challenge No 13

Is it possible for customers to apply for benefits over the telephone as they do for Pension Credit?

Response

This is not a viable proposition for Runnymede Benefits Service within current budgets. The Pension Service is staffed to provide that kind of service through a Contact Centre and provides no other means of direct contact with customers. The Benefits Service does not have the resources for such an operation. Lengthy phone calls would quickly clog the telephone service into the Benefits Office which would then impact on the main council switchboard service. With the current level of staffing in the Benefits Service, time taken to complete application forms on the telephone would adversely affect the assessment of benefits and significantly reduce the level of overall service provided.

However, the Benefits Service employs Visiting Officers who help elderly, infirm and disabled people to complete application forms in their homes, if needed. A downloadable benefit claim form is also available through the Council's web site. It is planned to provide an interactive form in the near future.

Recommendation

No change to the current system. However, make the application form interactive on the Council's web site by 31st March 2005.

Challenge No 14

Retention of Benefits staff is difficult because of the high value placed upon their services by other Local Authorities. Should more staff be permitted to work from home to help with staff retention?

Response

For the past 5 years the Benefits Service has had a part-time member of staff (12.5 hours per week) supporting the Benefits service by working from home. This has been made possible by the provision of a computer in her home with an ISDN link initially and, more recently, an ADSL link. Whilst this gives us some insight into home working it would not be typical of how a number of full-time home workers would be managed. Experience of the current arrangement has shown some problems with the security of the files removed from the office, supervision of the workflow and contact with and by the officer concerned. Some of these problems could be magnified by more staff working this way. In recent months the home working officer has been working more from the office because of some of the difficulties mentioned.

It is likely that many of the problems can be resolved. The security of files would be assured with remote access to the Vignette document management system being provided when it is fully operational in the near future. It would then be possible to organise limited home working if proper manageable management controls can be put in place. Some staff would need to be

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

retained in the Civic Offices, e.g. reception staff and managers. Other staff could undertake processing work from home if the management and workflow issues are resolved satisfactorily.

Home working may then depend on whether there would be a demand by staff to work in that way. Discussion with existing staff would suggest that most would prefer to continue to work from the office. Many believe that it is important to come to a place of work for the variety, contact with colleagues and the separation of home and work life. There is general belief that they have fewer distractions in the office, i.e. no demands from family, that they can manage their work better from the office, that it is not possible to do some types of work from home, e.g. interviewing customers, and that they will be supervised correctly in the office with proper help and guidance at hand.

Recommendation

There has been significant turnover of staff in the Benefits Service over the past few years. However, in the main this has not been due to staff leaving to join other councils. Staff have left for life changing reasons such as career changes, retirement, emigration and for personal, family or health reasons. Retention of staff is not the main problem. Recruitment of experienced staff is, however, a problem experienced within Runnymede and by many other councils. In the absence of applications from experienced staff, Runnymede Benefits Service has been recruiting inexperienced staff and training them to competent levels. This has worked successfully. This, together with the wish by most of the existing staff to continue working from the office, means that it is not believed that home working is needed at this stage as a means of retaining staff.

Question raised common to Revenues and Benefits Services

Challenge No 15

Will staff be consulted on the level and quality of service provided as part of the consultation process of this Best Value review?

Response

Staff have been consulted and the results will be analysed for comments and suggestions for best practice. Examples coming from staff include:

- the customer complaints procedure should be more transparent for staff
- provide more training for Receptionists to deal with a wider range of Benefits queries
- most did not believe a telephone application service would work with current resources
- most staff would not want to work from home
- most staff want more training which would benefit customers and help with retention of staff
- provide more rooms to interview the public

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Recommendation

Evaluate and implement pertinent staff suggestions.

Challenge No 16

Increase the extent by which the sections' services can be accessed electronically, including the introduction of on-line forms.

Response

The new Benefits web site went live in December 2004. It includes an on-line benefit calculator to provide a guide to the amount of benefit to which a customer could be entitled, downloadable leaflets, a change of circumstances form and a downloadable benefit application form. The Benefits Service's performance is published on the site and general information for customers, including FAQs, is available for their information and assistance.

Recommendation

Maintain the Benefits web site keeping it up-to-date with the latest information on changes and developments.

Challenge No 17

Use benchmarking data to improve the quality of the services.

Response

The Benefits Service relies on benchmarking data to improve services. The data is gathered within the Surrey Authorities (see Appendix 8). Data is also available from the DWP as a result of it compiling the information provided by local authorities in the monitoring returns submitted to the DWP every quarter (see Appendix 9).

Recommendation

The Benefits Service compares favourably with neighbouring boroughs and other boroughs of a similar size. However, not all local authorities operate their Benefits services or treat their costs the same way. For this reason it is important that benchmarking is seen only as a guide to the monitoring of performance and costs and not as a definitive comparison between authorities. It is not believed that any changes are required at this time.

Challenge No 18

Review service levels and quality levels in the light of consultation.

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

Response

A survey of Benefits customers was conducted in accordance with the requirements for the Best Value Performance Indicators laid down by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

These are the results from the two surveys held in November 2003 and January 2004. The questions asked in the questionnaire were provided by the DWP and the Council had no discretion to alter or add to the questions.

435 surveys were returned out of 600 sent.

Satisfied with the contact/access facilities at the benefit office	81%
Satisfied with service in the benefits office	79%
Satisfied with the telephone service	76%
Satisfied with staff in the benefits office	81%
Satisfied with the clarity of forms/leaflets etc	65%
Satisfied with the time taken for a decision	75%
Satisfaction with the overall service (BVPI target = 80%)	82%

Main areas for improvement

76% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the telephone service. In June 2004 a contact centre facility was implemented in the Benefits Service with the aim of improving upon this result. This service provides customers with one telephone number instead of a number of direct line numbers. Customers go directly through to the Benefits Service to a greeting and the option to select an application form request service or to hold for a Benefits Representative. Customers are then passed directly through to a representative or held in a queue and advised of their position.

To date, there have been no complaints or adverse comments about the new system from members of the public.

The following is an example of one month's calls (November 2004).

• Number of calls received	1364
• Number of calls answered	1191
• Number of calls abandoned	127
• Number of calls out of hours	46

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

- Average waiting time 1.19 minutes
- Longest wait 10.48 minutes
- Average call length 6.18 minutes
- Abandonment:
 - on hearing greeting voice 4
 - on hearing waiting voice 75
 - before 5 seconds 76
 - before 10 seconds 18
 - before 30 seconds 5
 - before 60 seconds 4
 - after 300 seconds 24

The greeting voice lasts approximately 15 seconds.

It can be seen from the above that the majority of calls abandoned are in the first 10 seconds. The Council's own standard is to answer calls within 4 rings or 12 seconds.

The other main area for concern was satisfaction levels with the clarity of the forms, leaflets etc, where only 65% expressed satisfaction.

A new and much improved application form has been produced in line with the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) preferred format. The CAB was involved in the design and approval of the finished form. A number of new information leaflets have been designed and displayed in the reception area. The application form and the range of leaflets are also available on the Benefits Service web site.

As mentioned above, new benefit notification letters are currently awaiting production.

25% of customers felt that they were dissatisfied with the time taken for a decision to be made on a claim.

During 2003/04 the benefits team consistently met the BFI target for dealing with new claims within 36 days from the date of receipt. At the end of that year Runnymede Benefits Service achieved top quartile performance with an average of 30 days. Performance to date this year is 24 days which is well within the BFI target. Long delays in assessing claims are now more usually due to customers not providing the information or evidence requested or by the Rent Officer Service not handling cases within the statutory timescales.

Recommendation

BENEFITS SERVICE CHALLENGE

The Benefits Service will aim to maintain and, where possible, improve its performance and general standards of service delivery.

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q1. Do you think that a second payment date should be offered?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	868	85.9	86.6	86.6
	Yes	134	13.3	13.4	100.0
	Total	1002	99.1	100.0	
Missing	n/a	9	.9		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q2. Do you think the Council should offer a discount as an incentive to encourage residents to pay the full year's Council Tax on or before 1st April each year?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	340	33.6	34.2	34.2
	Yes	655	64.8	65.8	100.0
	Total	995	98.4	100.0	
Missing	n/a	16	1.6		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q3. If the Council offered you a 1.5% discount on your Council Tax bill, would you pay the full annual payment by 1st April?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	694	68.6	7	71.8
	Yes	273	27.0	28.2	100.0
	Total	967	95.6	100.0	
Missing	n/a	44	4.4		
Total		1011	100.0		

There were a number of comments on 1.5% not being a sufficient incentive and that the suggested discount should be increased.

Q4a Do you think the Council should save money by no longer paying Post Office transaction charges, thereby making the payer liable for the cost?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	398	39.4	41.5	41.5
	Yes	562	55.6	58.5	100.0
	Total	960	95.0	100.0	
Missing	n/a	51	5.0		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q4b Do you currently pay your Council Tax through the Post Office?

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

If No, please go to Question 5.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	872	86.3	93.1	93.1
	Yes	65	6.4	6.9	100.0
	Total	937	92.7	100.0	
Missing	n/a	74	7.3		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q4c If Yes, would you continue to pay by this method if you had to pay the transaction fee?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	71	7.0	81.6	81.6
	Yes	16	1.6	18.4	100.0
	Total	87	8.6	100.0	
Missing	n/a	924	91.4		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q4d If you answered No to the last question and you decided to pay another method, which one of the following would you choose?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Direct Debit	205	20.3	56.3	56.3
	In person	52	5.1	14.3	70.6
	By Post	57	5.6	15.7	86.3
	At a bank	33	3.3	9.1	95.3
	Credit/Debit Card	6	.6	1.6	97.0
	Payment by Telephone	2	.2	.5	97.5
	Online Payment	1	.1	.3	97.8
	By your Bank's Internet Service	4	.4	1.1	98.9
	Payment via BACS	4	.4	1.1	100.0
	Total	364	36.0	100.0	
	Missing	System	647	64.0	
Total		1011	100.0		

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q4e Is there an alternative method of payment you would like made available?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	193	19.1	95.5	95.5
	Yes	9	.9	4.5	100.0
Total		202	20.0	100.0	
Missing	n/a	809	80.0		
Total		1011	100.0		

Q4f If you answered Yes to the last question please specify

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	994	98.3	98.3	98.3
	2	1	.1	.1	98.4
	3	2	.2	.2	98.6
	5	1	.1	.1	98.7
	5	2	.2	.2	98.9
	Banker's order	1	.1	.1	99.0
	By cheque	1	.1	.1	99.1
	CHQ BY POST	1	.1	.1	99.2
	D.D	1	.1	.1	99.3
	Direct debit	1	.1	.1	99.4
	Direct debit or in person	1	.1	.1	99.5
	HALF YEARLY	1	.1	.1	99.6
	HALF YEARLY PAYMENTS	2	.2	.2	99.8
	Over the counter				
	Payment direct to RBC	1	.1	.1	99.9
	QUARTERLY	1	.1	.1	100.0
	Total	1011	100.0	100.0	

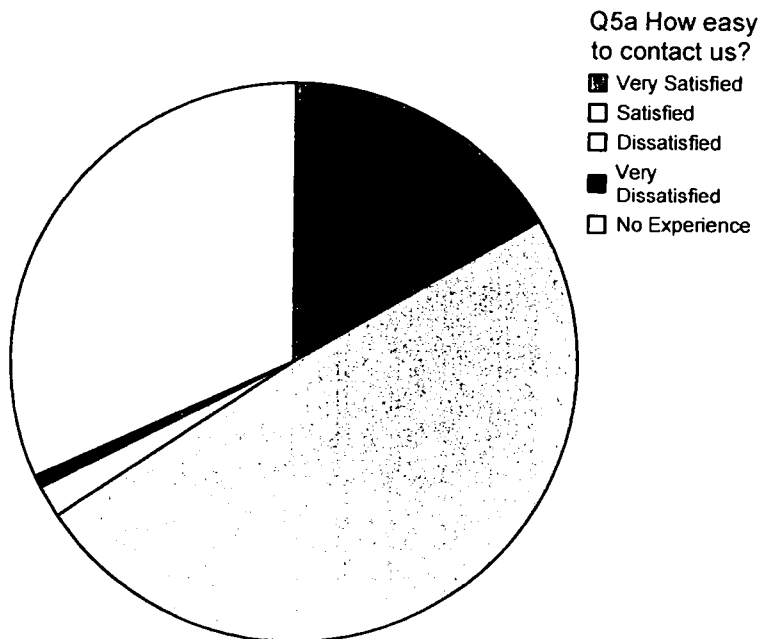
There were 3 suggestions of half yearly payments and 1 of quarterly payments. All other suggestions made are currently available.

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q5a How easy is it for you to contact us?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	161	15.9	16.4	16.4
	Satisfied	481	47.6	49.1	65.6
	Dissatisfied	18	1.8	1.8	67.4
	Very Dissatisfied	7	.7	.7	68.1
	No Experience	312	30.9	31.9	100.0
Missing	System	32	3.2		
Total		1011	100.0		

Contacted 5 of the dissatisfied/very dissatisfied and all 5 were relating to other sections.

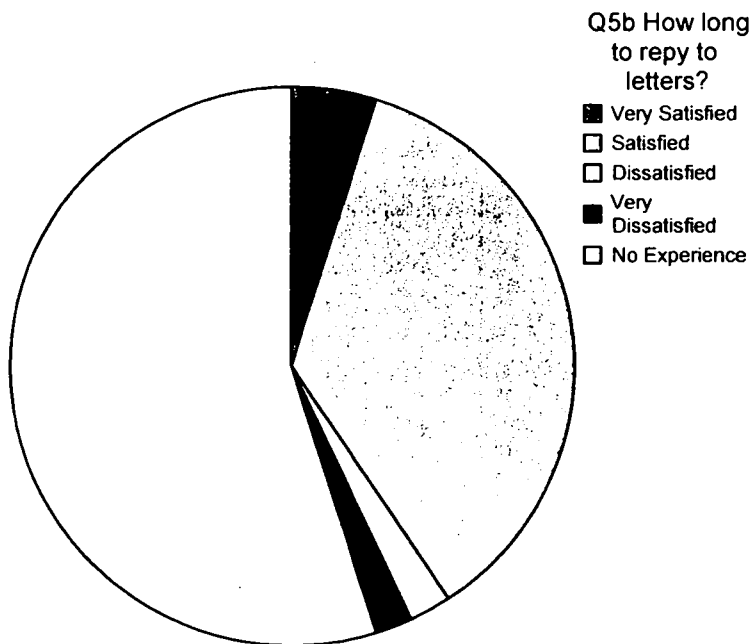


Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q5b How long does it take to reply to your letters?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	46	4.5	4.8	4.8
	Satisfied	342	33.8	35.8	40.6
	Dissatisfied	23	2.3	2.4	43.0
	Very Dissatisfied	20	2.0	2.1	45.1
	No Experience	524	51.8	54.9	100.0
Total		955	94.5	100.0	
Missing	System	56	5.5		
Total		1011	100.0		

Contacted 6 of the dissatisfied/very dissatisfied and all 6 were relating to other sections

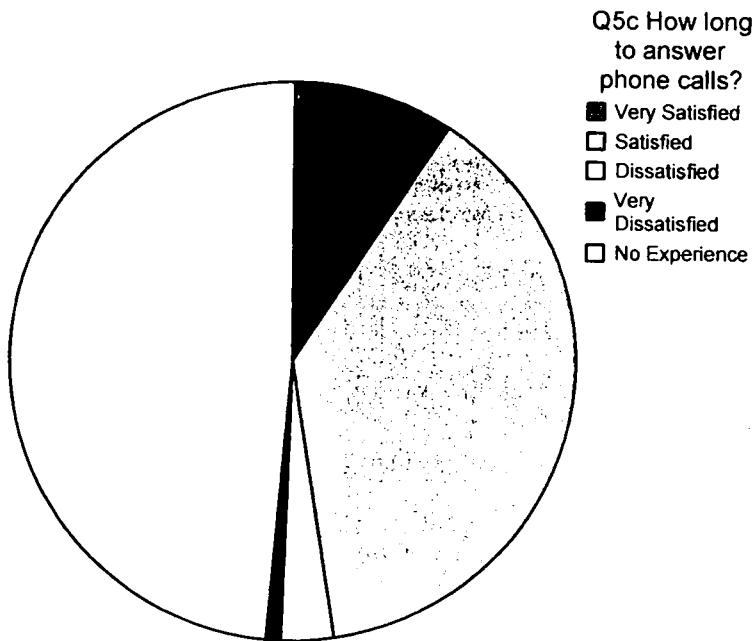


Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q5c How long it takes to answer your phone calls?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	88	8.7	9.1	9.1
	Satisfied	371	36.7	38.4	47.5
	Dissatisfied	29	2.9	3.0	50.5
	Very Dissatisfied	8	.8	.8	51.3
	No Experience	470	46.5	48.7	100.0
Total		966	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	45	4.5		
Total		1011	100.0		

Contacted 10 of the dissatisfied/very dissatisfied 1 related to Council Tax and the other 9 were for other sections

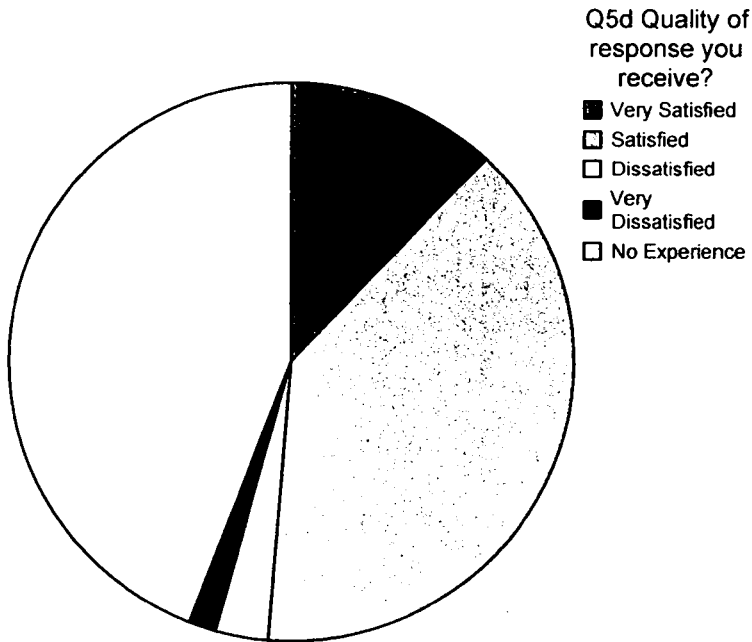


Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q5d The quality of the response you received?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	116	11.5	12.0	12.0
	Satisfied	378	37.4	39.2	51.2
	Dissatisfied	29	2.9	3.0	54.3
	Very Dissatisfied	15	1.5	1.6	55.8
	No Experience	426	42.1	44.2	100.0
Total		964	95.4	100.0	
Missing	System	47	4.6		
Total		1011	100.0		

Contacted 8 of the dissatisfied/very dissatisfied and all related to other sections

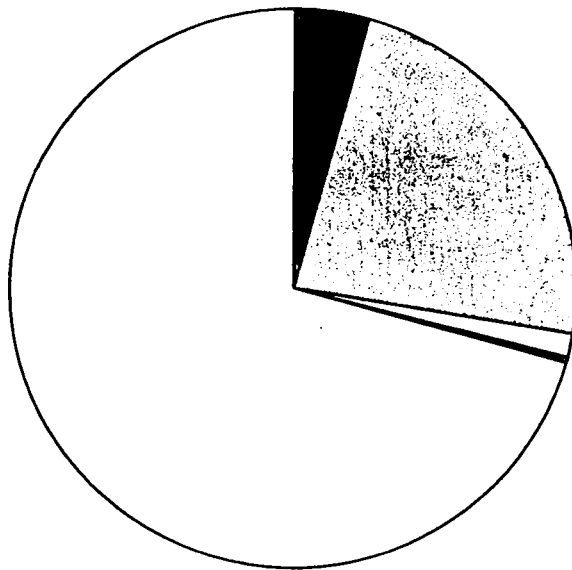


Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q5e How long it takes to see you if you visit the Civic Offices?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	40	4.0	4.2	4.2
	Satisfied	221	21.9	23.3	27.5
	Dissatisfied	13	1.3	1.4	28.9
	Very Dissatisfied	3	.3	.3	29.2
	No Experience	671	66.4	70.8	100.0
Missing	System	63	6.2		
Total		1011	100.0		

No follow up was made on the dissatisfied/very dissatisfied



Q5e How long to be seen at Civic Offices?

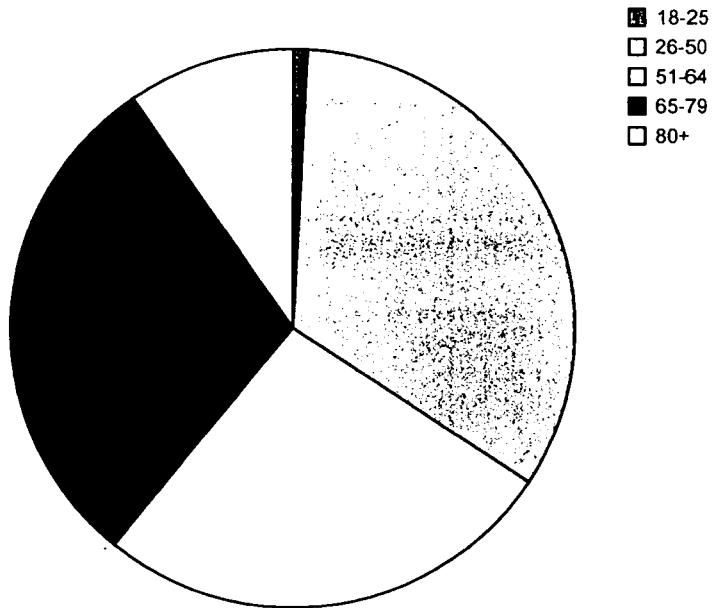
- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- No Experience

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q6a Age range

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25	8	.8	.8	.8
	26-50	330	32.6	33.4	34.2
	51-64	263	26.0	26.6	60.9
	65-79	291	28.8	29.5	90.4
	80+	95	9.4	9.6	100.0
	Total	987	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	24	2.4		
Total		1011	100.0		

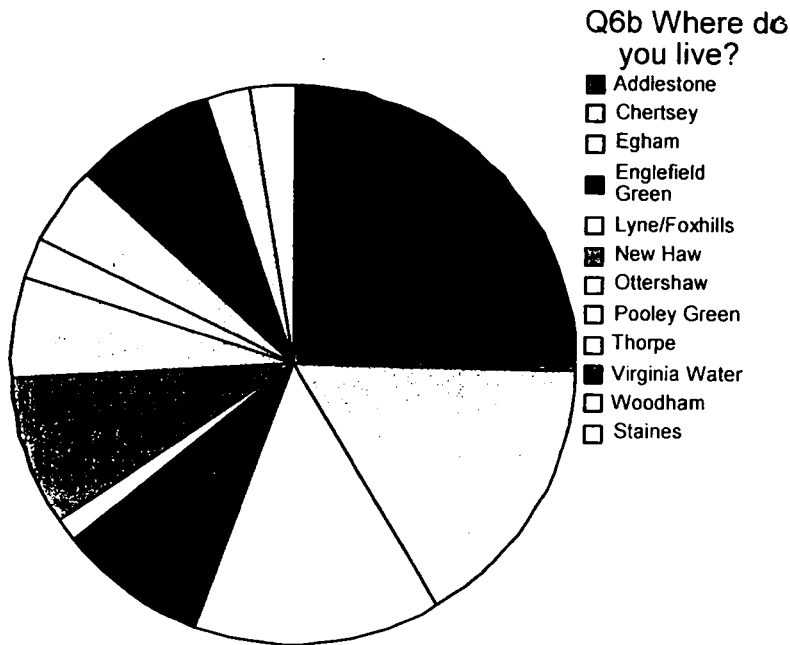
Q6a Age range



Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q6b Where in the Borough do you live?

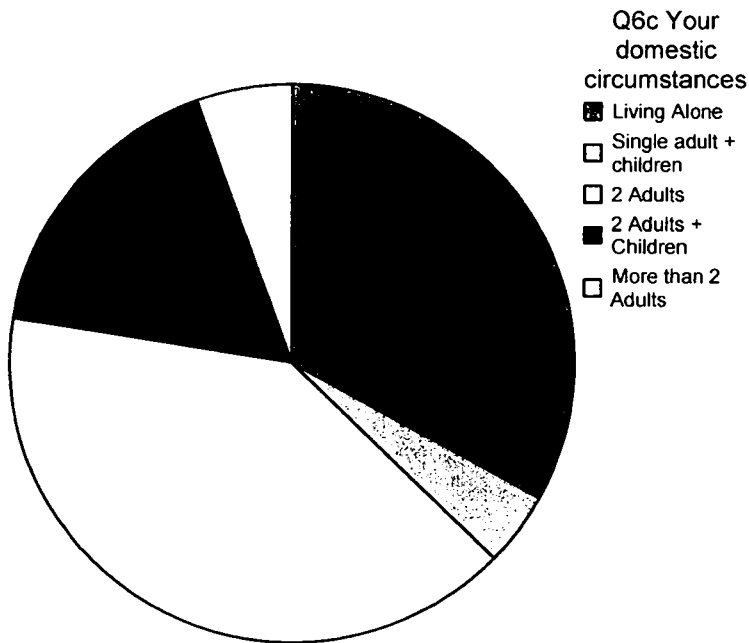
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Addlestone	249	24.6	25.2	25.2
	Chertsey	159	15.7	16.1	41.3
	Egham	140	13.8	14.2	55.5
	Englefield Green	84	8.3	8.5	64.0
	Lyne/Foxhills	14	1.4	1.4	65.5
	New Haw	85	8.4	8.6	74.1
	Ottershaw	58	5.7	5.9	79.9
	Pooley Green	23	2.3	2.3	82.3
	Thorpe	44	4.4	4.5	86.7
	Virginia Water	80	7.9	8.1	94.8
	Woodham	26	2.6	2.6	97.5
	Staines	25	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	987	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	24	2.4		
Total		1011	100.0		



Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q6c What are your domestic circumstances?

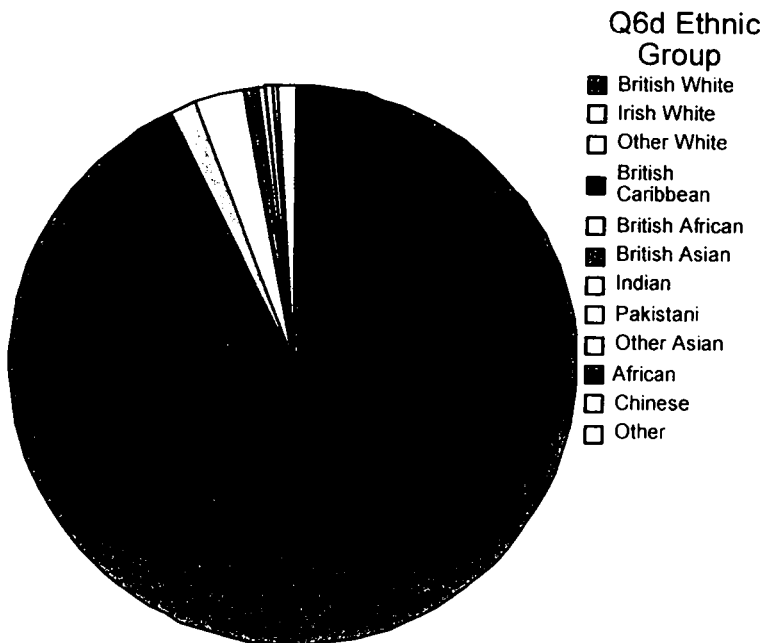
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Living Alone	324	32.0	33.0	33.0
	Single adult + children	42	4.2	4.3	37.3
	2 Adults	395	39.1	40.2	77.5
	2 Adults + Children	167	16.5	17.0	94.5
	More than 2 Adults	54	5.3	5.5	100.0
	Total	982	97.1	100.0	
Missing	System	29	2.9		
Total		1011	100.0		



Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Q6d What ethnic Group do you belong to?

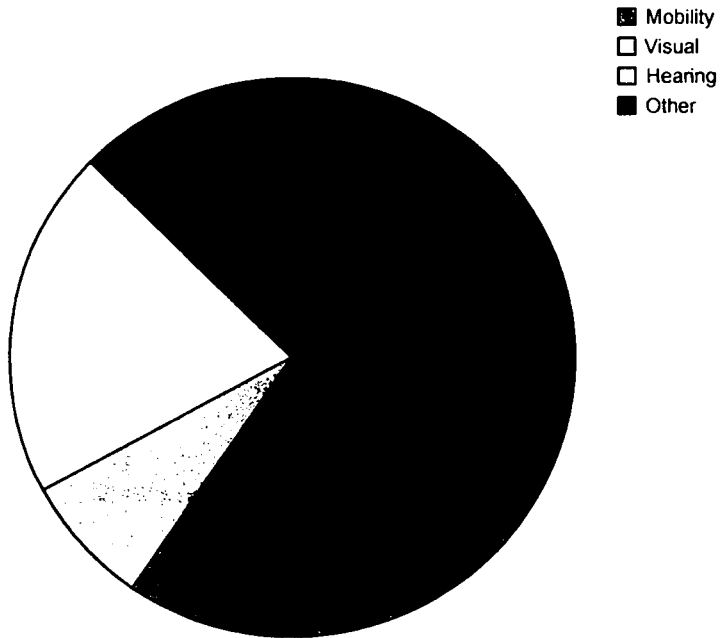
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	British White	910	90.0	92.7	92.7
	Irish White	15	1.5	1.5	94.2
	Other White	27	2.7	2.7	96.9
	British Caribbean	1	.1	.1	97.0
	British African	1	.1	.1	97.1
	British Asian	6	.6	.6	97.8
	Indian	4	.4	.4	98.2
	Pakistani	1	.1	.1	98.3
	Other Asian	3	.3	.3	98.6
	African	1	.1	.1	98.7
	Chinese	3	.3	.3	99.0
	Other	10	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	982	97.1	100.0	
	Missing	System	29	2.9	
Total		1011	100.0		



Council Tax Survey Results 2004

Do you have a disability that we need to take account of when communicating with you?

		Q6a Age range				Total
		26-50	51-64	65-79	80+	
Disabilities	Mobility		6	21	18	45
	Visual			3	3	6
	Hearing	1	3	6	6	16
	Other		3	7		10
Total		1	12	37	27	77



APPENDIX 4

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

RESULTS OF THE COUNCIL TAX CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

The results of this survey include data that also refers to other sections of the Council. Without actually contacting every customer who expressed that they were dissatisfied/very dissatisfied, it is impossible to say exactly what percentage refers to the Council Tax section.

QUESTIONS ASKED	VERY SATISFIED/ SATISFIED	VERY DISSATISFIED/ DISSATISFIED/	NO EXPERIENCE
How easy is it for you to contact us?	65.5%	2.5%	32.0%
How long it takes to reply to your letters?	40.6%	4.5%	54.9%
How long it takes to answer your phone calls?	47.5%	3.8%	48.7%
The quality of the response you received?	51.2%	4.6%	44.2%
How long it takes to see you when you visit the Civic Offices?	7.5%	1.7%	70.8%

Overall, of customers who had experience of contacting the Council, 91% were satisfied with the service they received.

Council Tax Survey Results 2004

COMMENTS MADE ON SURVEY FORMS

There were a number of comments made on forms returned and they did not all relate to Council Tax issues. A sample of the comments is as follows:

Why do we need new Council Offices when there are two brand new buildings standings idle in Aviation Park with all the services and accesses installed?

I only live off Liberty Lane which is not far to walk to the Council Offices. I find the staff helpful and pleasant if I have any enquiries to make about Rent and Poll Tax etc.

I do not wish to complete this questionnaire unless you devise to cut the cost of the Council Tax, which is a government decision. I want to know why all the houses sold within this area bought by Landlords of student accommodation and Landlords pay NO COUNCIL TAX. They own more than one property – why do they get away with this. SOUGHT IT OUT!!!

The money you are spending on this ridiculous survey would be far better spent on cleaning the roads and pavements directing your bin men not to obstruct the footpaths with the wheely bins after emptying them. Also making sure we have a police force and traffic wardens that are non existing in the Hythe area. At times women with prams and invalids have to walk in the road as cars are obstructing the pavements, mainly outside the Swan pub and many things that I could mention.

A well laid out questionnaire may it prove to be of benefit.

It appears to me that the purpose of this questionnaire is levelled at the cost of the Post Office service. Given the continual threat especially to smaller Post Offices from closure these days, surely it is prudent to make the best of them. The sort of people who depend on the service they are providing are the old and infirm mostly I would guess, making the mentioned derisory.

This questionnaire is an excellent idea.

I would prefer that you didn't waste resources on rubbish like this.

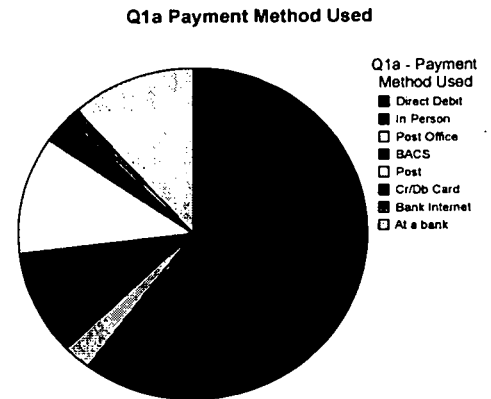
I am sorry I don't feel able to comment on the above questions as my Council Tax is paid for me.

One of your major Council Tax problems is the forms you send out, they are practically impossible to understand for young and especially old. Why is it not possible to send them out as they are necessary, but to save yourselves time from queries and money on admin, attach a sheet or add a line that says your monthly instalments will be XXXX. This would be helpful and I'm sure would save you money and many of us a lot of worry.

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q1a – What Payment Method do you currently use?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Direct Debit	46	58.2	59.0	59.0
In Person	1	1.3	1.3	60.3
Post Office	2	2.5	2.6	62.8
BACS	8	10.1	10.3	73.1
Post	9	11.4	11.5	84.6
Cr/Db Card	2	2.5	2.6	87.2
Bank Internet	1	1.3	1.3	88.5
At a bank	9	11.4	11.5	100.0
Total	78	98.7	100.0	
Missing	1	1.3		
Total	79	100.0		



Q1b – Is there an Alternative Method you would like made available?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid No	74	93.7	98.7	98.7
Yes	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
Total	75	94.9	100.0	
Missing No Reply	4	5.1		
Total	79	100.0		

Q1c - What Alternative Method would you like made available?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Bacs	1	1.3	100.0	100.0
Missing 1	78	98.7		
Total	79	100.0		

BACS is currently offered as a payment method. Details of this are included in the leaflets that accompany bills and also on the back page of payment books as well as the Council's web site.

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q1d – If you have paid using an automated or electronic method of payment, what method was used?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	BACS	4	5.1	36.4	36.4
	Direct Debit	5	6.4	18.2	81.8
	None	1	1.3	9.1	90.9
	Payment by Telephone	1	1.3	9.1	100.0
	Total	11	13.9	100.0	
Missing	1	68	86.1		
Total		79	100.0		

Q1e – Was this facility easy to use?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	3	3.8	20.0	20.0
	Yes	12	15.2	80.0	100.0
	Total	15	19.0	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	64	81.0		
Total		79	100.0		

Q1f - If 'No' Why was it not easy?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I do not trust these methods	1	1.3	50.0	50.0
	Not interested	1	1.3	50.0	100.0
	Total	2	2.5	100.0	
Missing	1	77	97.5		
Total		79	100.0		

Q1g – Would you use this facility again?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	2	2.5	13.3	13.3
	Yes	13	16.5	86.7	100.0
	Total	15	19.0	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	64	81.0		
Total		79	100.0		

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q1h - Why would you not use this facility again?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	As above in Q1f	1	1.3	100.0	100.0
Missing	1	78	98.7		
Total		79	100.0		

Q2 - Are you interested in receiving your bill electronically?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	48	60.8	63.2	63.2
	Yes	28	35.4	36.8	100.0
	Total	76	96.2	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	3	3.8		
Total		79	100.0		

Q3a - Have you looked for information on the Business Rates web page?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	69	87.3	90.8	90.8
	Yes	7	8.9	9.2	100.0
	Total	76	96.2	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	3	3.8		
Total		79	100.0		

Q3b - Did you find the information you were looking for on Runnymede OnLine?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	3	3.8	30.0	30.0
	Yes	7	8.9	70.0	100.0
	Total	10	12.7	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	69	87.3		
Total		79	100.0		

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

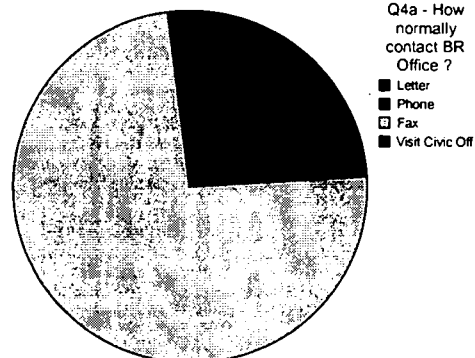
Q3c - What additional information should be added to Runnymede OnLine?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Have own database	1	1.3	12.5	12.5
I do not have a computer	1	1.3	12.5	25.0
I will be checking this out	1	1.3	12.5	37.5
None	1	1.3	12.5	50.0
Refuse Costs (Trade)	1	1.3	12.5	62.5
There can be no answer to this question - as we have not looked	1	1.3	12.5	75.0
Used VOA website - you might find a hyperlink to them handy	1	1.3	12.5	87.5
what are we paying for!!	1	1.3	12.5	100.0
Total	8	10.1	100.0	
Missing	71	89.9		
Total	79	100.0		

Q4a - How do you normally contact the Business Rates Office?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Letter	9	11.4	18.0	18.0
Phone	3	3.8	6.0	24.0
Fax	37	46.8	74.0	98.0
Visit Civic Off	1	1.3	2.0	100.0
Total	50	63.3	100.0	
Missing	29	36.7		
Total	79	100.0		

Q4a How do you normally contact the BR office?



Fax is used by BACs payers to notify the Council of imminent payments)

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q4b – How long it takes to reply to your letters?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	4	5.1	20.0	20.0
	Satisfied	15	19.0	75.0	95.0
	Very Dissatisfied	1	1.3	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	25.3	100.0	
Missing		38	48.1		
	No Experience Total	21	26.6		
Total		79	100.0		

Contact made with very dissatisfied customer. Dissatisfaction related refuse charges.

Q4c – How long it takes to reply to your e-mails?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	2	2.5	28.6	28.6
	Satisfied	4	5.1	57.1	85.7
	Very Dissatisfied	1	1.3	14.3	100.0
	Total	7	8.9	100.0	
Missing		46	58.2		
	No Experience Total	26	32.9		
Total		79	100.0		

Contact made with very dissatisfied customer. Dissatisfaction related refuse charges.

Q4d – How long it takes to reply to your faxes?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	1	1.3	20.0	20.0
	Satisfied	4	5.1	80.0	100.0
	Total	5	6.3	100.0	
Missing		47	59.5		
	No Experience Total	27	34.2		
Total		79	100.0		

Q4e – How long it takes to answer your phone calls via the main switchboard?

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	7	8.9	22.6	22.6
	Satisfied	22	27.8	71.0	93.5
	Dissatisfied	1	1.3	3.2	96.8
	Very Dissatisfied	1	1.3	3.2	100.0
	Total	31	39.2	100.0	
Missing		34	43.0		
	No Experience Total	14	17.7		
		48	60.8		
Total		79	100.0		

Dissatisfied customer - comment made by customer on form "I tried the main switchboard this morning. quite difficult to get through even when using direct lines."

Contact made with very dissatisfied customer. Dissatisfaction related to refuse charges.

Q4f - How long it takes to answer your phone calls by direct line to the office?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	11	13.9	32.4	32.4
	Satisfied	22	27.8	64.7	97.1
	Dissatisfied	1	1.3	2.9	100.0
	Total	34	43.0	100.0	
Missing		32	40.5		
	No Experience Total	13	16.5		
		45	57.0		
Total		79	100.0		

Dissatisfied customer contacted, confirmed that dissatisfaction is with the valuation of the premises. The Borough Valuer is in contact with the Valuation Office on this matter. The customer insisted that she couldn't get through on either of the direct lines so had to come in and see the Valuer's Assistant.

Q4g - How long you have to wait to be seen when you visit the Civic Offices?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Satisfied	12	15.2	100.0	100.0
Missing		42	53.2		
	No Experience Total	25	31.6		
		67	84.8		
Total		79	100.0		

Q4h - The quality of the response you received?

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

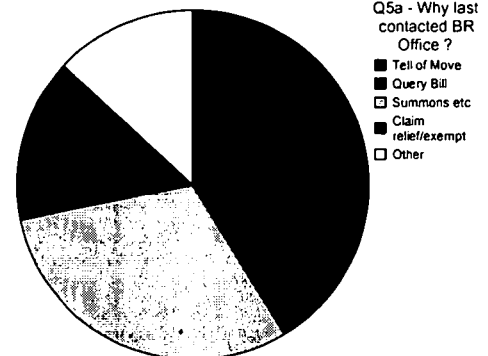
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Satisfied	8	10.1	26.7	26.7
	Satisfied	21	26.6	70.0	96.7
	Very Dissatisfied	1	1.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	30	38.0	100.0	
Missing		36	45.6		
	No Experience	13	16.5		
Total		79	100.0		

Contact made with very dissatisfied customer. Dissatisfaction related to refuse charges.

Q5a - Why did you last contact the Business Rates Office ?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Tell of Move	6	7.6	13.0	13.0
	Query Bill	13	16.5	28.3	41.3
	Summons etc	14	17.7	30.4	71.7
	Claim relief/exempt	7	8.9	15.2	87.0
	Other	6	7.6	13.0	100.0
	Total	46	58.2	100.0	
Missing		33	41.8		
Total		79	100.0		

Q5a Why did you last contact the BR office?



National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q5b - Why did you last contact the Business Rates Office ? – Other Responses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	About refuse collection	1	1.3	5.9	5.9
	Ask about CASC	1	1.3	5.9	11.8
	Can't remember!	1	1.3	5.9	17.6
	Change of name	1	1.3	5.9	23.5
	Find out how much rates are for 2004/5	1	1.3	5.9	29.4
	General Query	1	1.3	5.9	35.3
	I just started my business so I needed some information	1	1.3	5.9	41.2
	Lost cheque by the bank	1	1.3	5.9	47.1
	Name Change	1	1.3	5.9	52.9
	No need has ever arisen	1	1.3	5.9	58.8
	Not sure	1	1.3	5.9	64.7
	Rate Rebate	1	1.3	5.9	70.6
	To change company rates paid by	1	1.3	5.9	76.5
	To discuss Inland Revenues latest rates notice	1	1.3	5.9	82.4
	To tell them about our company's name change	1	1.3	5.9	88.2
	We were sent bill for other unit in RBC in error	1	1.3	5.9	94.1
	When I take-over Business	1	1.3	5.9	100.0
	Total	17	21.5	100.0	
Missing		62	78.5		
Total		79	100.0		

Q6a – Are the opening hours acceptable?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	7	8.9	9.1	9.1
	Yes	70	88.6	90.9	100.0
	Total	77	97.5	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	2	2.5		
Total		79	100.0		

Q6b – If you answered 'No' to the above, what opening hours would you would like?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I would like to be able to communicate by email as I tend to	1	1.3	25.0	25.0
	Normal business hrs are 9-5.30 or 6 5 days a week - why 4.30	1	1.3	25.0	50.0
	Open to 5/5.30 on Fridays, like all others!	1	1.3	25.0	75.0
	Weekends	1	1.3	25.0	100.0
	Total	4	5.1	100.0	
Missing	1	75	94.9		
Total		79	100.0		

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

Q7 - Would you like access to your Business Rates Account OnLine?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	43	54.4	58.1	58.1
	Yes	31	39.2	41.9	100.0
	Total	74	93.7	100.0	
Missing	No Reply	5	6.3		
Total		79	100.0		

Q8 - How can we improve upon the Business Rates service provided?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Amount of paper you send out with the bill is enormous	1	1.3	9.1	9.1
2	As a multisite business we have dealings with a large no.of ...	1	1.3	9.1	18.2
3	Get them right - the most recent one certainly is not	1	1.3	9.1	27.3
4	I am satisfied with the present arrangements.	1	1.3	9.1	36.4
5	I think you should send to every business a surveyor so they	1	1.3	9.1	45.5
6	maintain this personal approach & do not outsource nor use a	1	1.3	9.1	54.5
7	No	1	1.3	9.1	63.6
8	None	2	2.5	18.2	81.8
9	Poor communication/response to queries. ? Not enough staff?	1	1.3	9.1	90.9
10	See Q6	1	1.3	9.1	100.0
Total		11	13.9	100.0	
Missing		68	86.1		
Total		79	100.0		

The 3rd comment relates to a valuation matter. The 9th comment relates to other sections of the Council.

Q9 - Address for feedback?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	M A Rob, 198 Station Road, Addlestone, Surrey KT15 2PD	1	1.3	20.0	20.0
	No	1	1.3	20.0	40.0
	No	1	1.3	20.0	60.0
	None	1	1.3	20.0	80.0
	Norman Prince & Partners, 176 Station Road, Addlestone	1	1.3	20.0	100.0
Total		5	6.3	100.0	
Missing		74	93.7		
Total		79	100.0		

National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Survey 2004

COMMENTS MADE ON SURVEY FORMS

I would like to be able to communicate by email as I tend to work evenings/weekends.

What are we paying for!!

Would like to received bill both posted and e-mail.

Normal business hours are 9-5.30 (or6) 5 days a week – why 4.30on Fridays???

Would like information about CASC.

I think you should send to every business a surveyor so they can measure how much space business use and storage facilities should be lower value.

Dissatisfied customer - comment made by customer on form "I tried the main switchboard this morning, quite difficult to get through even when using direct lines."

Maintain the personal approach and do not outsource or use a call management system.

The amount of paper you send out with the bill is enormous and goes straight into the bin. I suggest these leaflets are available on request or on line rather than sent out to all. You might save some money.

I am satisfied with the present arrangements.

As a multi site business we have dealings with a large number of Business Rates Departments. We have had no problems with this local authority in the past two years.

SURREY AUTHORITIES - COMPARISONS 2003/2004

	ELMBRIDGE	MOLE VALLEY	REIGATE & BANSTEAD	RUNNYMEDE	SPELTHORNE	TANDRIDGE	WOKING	GUILDFORD
COUNCIL TAX COLLECTION RESULTS 2003/2004	99.1%	99.1%	98.9%	98.3%	98.3%	98.7%	98.4%	98.4%
BUSINESS RATES COLLECTION RESULTS 2003/2004	99.2%	99.5%	99.2%	99.6%	99.6%	99.0%	97.1%	99.3%
COMPUTER SYSTEM USED	ANITE	ACADEMY	SX3 I-WORLD	SX3 I-WORLD	ACADEMY	ACADEMY	ACADEMY	IBS
AUDDIS SITE*	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
PAPERLESS DIRECT DEBIT SCHEME	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
CASH INSTALMENT BOOK SUPPLIED	YES	YES BUT ONLY ON REQUEST	SLIPS FOR BANK ONLY	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
DO COUNCIL PAY POST OFFICE TRANSACTION FEE	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
CREDIT/DEBIT CARD ACCEPTED	DEBIT CARD ONLY	CREDIT & DEBIT CARD	CREDIT & DEBIT CARDS	CREDIT & DEBIT CARDS	CREDIT & DEBIT CARDS	CREDIT & DEBIT CARDS	YES	YES
DO COUNCIL PAY TRANSACTION FEE	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
OFFER MORE THAN ONE PAYMENT DATE	DIRECT DEBIT ONLY 1/10/20 TH	DIRECT DEBIT ONLY 5/15/25 TH	NO	NO	DIRECT DEBIT ONLY 1/15/22 ND	ALL METHODS 1/15/28 TH	DIRECT DEBIT ONLY 1/10/20 TH	NO

APPENDIX 7

	2003/04	Elmbridge	Epsom & E	Guildford	Mole Valley	Reigate & B	Runnymede	Spelthorne	Surrey Heath	Tandridge	Waverley	Woking
A. Caseload												
1 Rent Rebates	20	16	3,200	1,720	0	1,830	0	0	0	0	2,900	2,090
2 Private Rents	1,200	500	1,800	550	1,550	730	500	0	0	0	720	560
3 RSL's	3,300	1,200	920	390	3,350	500	3,025	0	0	0	600	640
4 Ctax benefit	5,200	2,240	5,400	3,080	4,600	3,800	4,100	0	0	0	5,000	3,800
	9,720	3,956	11,320	6,740	9,500	6,860	7,625	0	0	0	9,220	7,090
B. Payments												
5 Rent Rebates	200,000	61,190	10,507,300	4,838,100	b & b	5,613,000	0	0	0	0	9,000,000	6,700,000
6 Private Rents	9,310,236	3,200,621	8,265,380	2,856,332	15,900,000	5,225,700	15,000,000	0	0	0	1,900,000	4,100,000
7 RSL's	11,866,169	4,401,804	inc above	1,278,050	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,500,000	2,000,000
8 Ctax benefit	4,850,000	1,770,000	4,230,470	2,363,000	4,119,400	3,285,900	4,339,128	0	0	0	3,700,000	3,500,000
	26,226,405	9,433,615	23,003,150	11,335,482	20,019,400	14,124,600	19,339,128	0	0	0	18,100,000	16,300,000
C. Administration												
9 Employee salaries	744,260	0	0	535,550	775,700	507,800	429,160	0	0	0	552,460	545,507
10 Supplies & Services	61,260	0	0	21,050	92,000	44,800	61,460	0	0	0	16,980	4,976
11 IT	228,420	0	0	80,750	350,129	15,400	123,630	0	0	0	120,860	142,814
12 Accommodation	113,470	0	0	39,300	95,889	43,100	34,800	0	0	0	41,680	89,581
13 Other support	273,630	0	0	97,300	311,413	176,500	146,290	0	0	0	155,050	230,300
14 Other misc	0	0	0	5,000	0	13,300	0	0	0	0	13,530	0
	1,421,040	0	0	778,950	1,625,131	800,900	795,340	0	0	0	900,560	1,013,178
16 Admin subsidy	510,050	0	0	352,850	431,700	302,000	503,023	0	0	0	401,523	323,437
D. Cost of claims												
17 Ave cost of a claim	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£107.65	£156.84	£90.42	£68.81	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£78.91	£100.00
E. BVPIs (Targets 2004/05)												
18 New claims	25.0	32.0	16.0	28.0	25.0	30.0	36.0	29.0	0.0	0.0	35.0	19.0
19 Change of circs	5.0	9.0	4.0	8.0	0.0	6.0	7.0	6.0	0.0	0.0	7.0	4.0
20 Renewals		n/a	n/a	0.0%	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	N/A
21 Accuracy	97.0%	98.0%	100.0%	99.0%	98.0%	98.0%	98.0%	99.0%	99.0%	0.0%	96.0%	99.0%
22 Overpayments recovery	45.0%	61.5%	50.0%	50.0%	68.0%	65.0%	45.0%	68.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	60.0%

Runnymede Benefit Services Key Performance Indicators.

Feedback from the DWP on results are broken into 4 levels called quartiles.

Average number of calendar days to process a new claim

Performance standard requires 36 days or less.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 30 days

Runnymede was placed in the **top quartile**.

Average number of days taken to process change of circumstances

Performance standard requires 9 days or less.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 6 days

Runnymede was placed in the **top quartile**.

Percentage of renewal claims processed on time

Performance standard requires 83%.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 79%

Runnymede was placed in the **top quartile**.

Accuracy of processing

Performance standard requires 99%.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 98%

Runnymede was placed in the **2nd quartile**.

New claims determined within 14 days of receipt of all necessary information

Performance standard requires 90%.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 87%

Runnymede was placed in the **2nd quartile**.

Rent Allowance claims where the first payment is made on time or within 14 days

Performance standard requires 83%.

Runnymede performance for 2003/04 was 76%

Runnymede was placed in the **2nd quartile**.