

Local Authority Omnibus Survey – Wave 21

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The Local Authority (LA) Omnibus Survey is conducted every six months among managers with responsibility for the administration of Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB). It aims to provide the Department with a regular means of finding out how LAs organise their benefit administration and view current and future policy and regulations.

This summary presents the findings of key sections of Wave 21 of the Survey, which was carried out between 21 June and 25 August 2010. More detailed findings from these and other sections are given in the full report, which is available free of charge on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) website.

Wave 21 of the Survey covered the following areas:

- HB and CTB; take-up and reform;
- temporary accommodation;
- Local Authority Claim Information (LACI) documents;
- war pensions;
- residential carers;
- efficiency programme.

HB/CTB take-up

The vast majority of LAs promoted HB and CTB to residents, mostly by messages in correspondence (90 per cent and 94 per cent respectively), articles on the website (85 per cent and 84 per cent respectively) and advertisements in council-run and independent newspapers (both 71 per cent).

Among those that had actively promoted HB and CTB in the last 12 months, three in five (62 per cent) had noticed some increase in take-up as a result of the campaign. Six per cent had noticed a significant difference in take-up and one in eight had not noticed any increase at all.

Around two in three LAs used customer data to target residents/groups of residents most likely to be eligible for HB and CTB. Among those LAs using customer data in this way, the majority had noticed an increase in take-up (six per cent had noticed a significant increase and 68 per cent had noticed some increase).

Among the third of LAs that did not use customer data to target residents/groups of residents, more than one in three said that they could not obtain the data they needed (HB 37 per cent and CTB 38 per cent).

Half of LAs did not promote HB or CTB to their own employees. However, among those that did, staff magazines (both 25 per cent), intranet articles (both 25 per cent) and messages in payslips (both 17 per cent) were the most popular means with which to do so.

Temporary accommodation

A significantly lower percentage of LAs held Private Sector Leased (PSL) and Housing Association Leasing (HAL) properties at Wave 21 compared with Wave 19: 43 per cent held PSL properties at Wave 21 compared with 50 per cent at Wave 19 and 30 per cent held HAL properties at Wave 21 compared with 38 per cent at Wave 19. There has been no change in the proportion of LAs holding licensed properties (41 per cent).

Around one in four LAs that had PSL or licensed properties (23 per cent) said that none of these households contained anyone in employment. This was a significantly higher percentage than said this a year ago.

LACI documents

Employment and support Allowance (ESA) LACI was described as accurate by three-quarters (77 per cent) and complete by three in five (60 per cent).

More than eight in ten LAs (84 per cent) said that they had to request missing information in order for them to be able to assess a claim to benefit. When asked to specify the types of missing information, there were particularly high numbers mentioning missing tenancy agreements/rent information (89 per cent).

The operational guidance for ESA and LACI was highly rated among those that used them.

War pensions

The majority of LAs (95 per cent) had data on the number of HB and CTB claims with income classified as a War Pension. Eighty-nine per cent also had data on the numbers of claims where a discretionary disregard was made.

The majority of LAs (95 per cent) applied a discretionary disregard to war pensions in full, three per cent applied a disregard in part and one per cent did not apply a disregard at all.

Home carers

Three in five LAs (62 per cent) did not know how many private sector claims they had received in the last month where the accommodation had a sleeper/

additional room(s), over and above what might normally be allowed, which were required to accommodate carers who did not live with the claimant.

The main other circumstances where LAs were most likely to consider an additional room in the accommodation necessary included: for large medical equipment (61 per cent), where a couple or siblings needed separate rooms for medical reasons (56 per cent and 55 per cent respectively) and, if care was shared between parents, a room was needed for non-resident children (41 per cent).

Efficiency

LAs were asked about the initiatives included in their plans to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their HB/CTB services and the savings made from each one. Three in four LAs included on-line claim forms in their plans, which is significantly more than said this a year ago (68 per cent). The percentage of LAs mentioning organisational restructure has gone up since Wave 19 when 55 per cent of LAs said it was included in their initiatives.

For savings, one of the biggest gaps recorded was for on-line claim forms: two thirds (66 per cent) expected net savings at Wave 19 but only 27 per cent said they had achieved savings through this initiative at Wave 21.

Almost all LAs said that they had experienced an increase in claim form and information requests and customer enquiries as a result of the economic downturn. Around three-quarters (72 per cent) had experienced an increase in debt management and a similar percentage (71 per cent) had noticed an increase in overpayment activity (which represents a significant increase from the 60 per cent recorded at Wave 19).

A new question was asked at Wave 21 about whether or not the impact of the economic downturn had lessened so far in two-thirds (66 per cent) said it had not.

About the survey

One manager from all LAs in England, Scotland and Wales was invited to take part in Wave 21 of the Survey. Each received an advance letter that included a copy of the questionnaire, so that they could, if necessary, consult other managers.

A total of 232 LAs participated in the survey and this includes some LAs that did not complete every section of the questionnaire. Overall, 173 filled in the questionnaire on the web, 40 on paper and 19 on the telephone, between 21 June and 25 August 2010.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 918 5. Research Report 721. January 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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