

HERTSMERE BOROUGH COUNCIL
BEST VALUE & AUDIT COMMISSION PERFORMANCE INDICATORS
SURVEY OF PLANNING APPLICANTS
(April 2006 to September 2006)
FINAL REPORT

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Overall satisfaction (BVPI 111)

The overall satisfaction from the preliminary results, (yet to be validated by DCLG), was 52%. 51.6% of all respondents expressed satisfaction 'with the service provided by the Council in processing their application' whilst 17.2% reported that they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' and 31.2% expressed dissatisfaction (19.4% 'very dissatisfied' + 11.8% 'fairly dissatisfied').

OVERALL SATISFACTION BVPI 111

BVPI 111 OVERALL SATISFACTION					
Group	Satisfied	95% Confidence Interval	Base No. (100%)	Neither satisfied /dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
<u>2006: all respondents:</u>	51.6%	± 10.2%	93	(17.2%)	(31.2%)

Satisfaction with individual elements of the service provided can be assessed by the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with individual attitude statements. Agreement was highest in respect of understanding of the decision made, (60.2%); and advice and help received, (57% agreement). The highest level of disagreement was in respect of having been kept informed of the progress of the application, (40.9% disagreement), and dealing with queries promptly, (39.1% disagreement); suggesting that dissatisfaction is at least in part related to information receipt or lack of it.

A cross tabulation of overall satisfaction and agreement that they were kept informed of the progress of their application shows that of the 29 respondents who were dissatisfied overall 24 disagreed that they had been kept informed about the progress of their application. Similarly of those who were dissatisfied 24 disagreed that their queries had been dealt with promptly and 25 disagreed that they were treated fairly and that their viewpoint had been listened to.

Whilst there is a tendency for those who are dissatisfied to be less satisfied with all aspects of service received only 19 of the 29 overall dissatisfied respondents only 19 disagreed that they understood the reasons for the decision made and only 16 disagreed that they had been given advice and help needed.

		Q6: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the service provided by the Council in processing your application?					Total
		Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	
Q5: AGREE/DISAGREE - I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly	Strongly agree	5	2				7
	Agree	7	27	7	3	2	46
	Neither agree nor disagree		3	6	2	2	13
	Disagree		1	3	3	4	11
	Strongly disagree		2		2	7	11
Q5: AGREE/DISAGREE - The Council kept me informed about the progress of my application	Strongly agree	2	2				4
	Agree	7	15	3	2		27
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	12	6	1	1	23
	Disagree		6	5	3	3	17
	Strongly disagree		1	2	5	13	21
Q5: AGREE/DISAGREE - The Council dealt promptly with my queries	Strongly agree	4					4
	Agree	8	20	3	2		33
	Neither agree nor disagree		9	5		1	15
	Disagree		6	6	5	4	21
	Strongly disagree				4	11	15
Q5: AGREE/DISAGREE - I understand the reasons for the decision made on my application(s)	Strongly agree	5					5
	Agree	7	30	6	6	2	51
	Neither agree nor disagree		4	5		2	11
	Disagree		1	4	2	5	12
	Strongly disagree			1	3	9	13
Q5: AGREE/DISAGREE - I felt that I was treated fairly and that my viewpoint was listened to	Strongly agree	5	2				7
	Agree	7	27	2	1		37
	Neither agree nor disagree		5	9	1	2	17
	Disagree			5	6	5	16
	Strongly disagree		1		3	11	15
Total		12	35	16	11	18	92

In detail, 57.0% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly' whilst 23.6% disagreed. 33.3% of respondents agreed with the statement 'the Council kept me informed about the progress of my application' (4.3% 'strongly agree' + 29.0% 'agree'), whilst 40.9% disagreed.

40.2% of respondents agreed with the statement 'the Council dealt promptly with my queries' whilst 39.1% disagreed. 60.2% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I understand the reasons for the decision made on my application(s)' whilst 26.9% disagreed. 47.3% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I felt that I was treated fairly and that my viewpoint was listened to' whilst 33.3% disagreed.

68.1% of respondents reported that they had been granted permission/consent for their most recent application, and 31.9% had been refused permission or consent.

		Q7: Was your most recent application:				Total	
		Granted permission/consent		Refused permission/consent		Count	Col %
		Count	Col %	Count	Col %		
Q6: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the service provided by the Council in processing your application?	Very satisfied	12	19.4%			12	13.2%
	Fairly satisfied	31	50.0%	4	13.8%	35	38.5%
	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	7	11.3%	9	31.0%	16	17.6%
	Fairly dissatisfied	6	9.7%	5	17.2%	11	12.1%
	Very dissatisfied	6	9.7%	11	37.9%	17	18.7%
Total		62	100.0%	29	100.0%	91	100.0%

As can be seen from the above cross tabulation those who were refused consent were more likely to be dissatisfied, (55.1%), than those who were granted consent, (19.4%), although nearly one in five of those who were granted consent were also dissatisfied.

Service Improvements

Respondents who had made more than one application in the last three years (66.7%) were asked whether a number of services had got better or worse over the last three years, or has it stayed the same?

Almost two thirds (65.4%) were of the view that 'the advice and help provided to applicants' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. 11.5% that it had 'got better', and 23.1% who thought it had got 'worse'. The majority (60.0%) believed that 'the information provided about the progress of applications' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years, while 9.1% thought that it had 'got better', and 30.9% thought it had got 'worse'.

Over half (56.4%) reported that 'the promptness with which queries about applications were dealt' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years, while 7.3% thought it had 'got better', and 36.4% thought that it had got 'worse'. Over two thirds (68.5%) indicated that 'the clarity of the reasons for the decisions given' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. 1.9% of respondents thought that it had 'got better', compared to 29.6% who thought it had got 'worse'.

Almost two thirds (64.8%) were of the view that the 'fairness with which the application was dealt' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. However, 3.7% thought that it had 'got better'; whereas 31.5% thought it had got 'worse'.

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1.0 BACKGROUND AND SURVEY OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 The purpose of the survey was to obtain feedback from planning applicants in order to gather information relating to Best Value Performance Indicator No. 111 (BVPI 111): 'satisfaction with the planning service by those making a planning application'.

- 1.2 The target population was 'all planning applicants or agents of applicants who had received a decision letter on their application between April 1st and September 30th, 2006'.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 All survey methodology was in line with the 'Guidance for undertaking the Best Value Surveys' as provided by the Department of the Deputy Prime Minister (subsequently changed to Department of Communities and Local Government) on the Best Value Website – www.survey.bvpi.gov.uk
- 2.2 Hertsmere Borough Council Planning Department provided NWA with lists of all applicants/ agents who had received a decision letter on their application between 1st April and 30th September 2006. These lists contained names and addresses of individuals informed, telephone numbers, date of submission, date of decision, whether a single or joint application, and unique identifier. The lists contained a total of **387 applications**.
- 2.3 Duplications were removed from the database by NWA (when multiple notifications had been made to individuals/ companies, the 'first notification' was included in the sample frame and all subsequent ones removed). When all duplicates had been removed, the **number of applicants** who had received a decision letter from the authority during the six-month period totalled **283**.
- 2.4 Survey Guidelines state that 'if the number of applicants/agents is fewer than 800 within the sampling window, the surveyed population must be a census of all applicants/ agents within that period. The Audit Commission was therefore informed in October 2006 that Hertsmere Borough Council would be undertaking a 'census' of applicants/ agents for the 2006 BVPI Planning survey.
- 2.5 Self-completion questionnaires, with letters requesting assistance with the research and a reply-paid return envelope, were sent to all 283 applicants/ individuals. The questionnaire and letter were in the format provided on BVPI Website www.survey.bvpi.gov.uk. A copy of the questionnaire is attached as **Appendix 1** to this report.
- 2.6 The initial letter and questionnaire were posted on 10th October 2006. Respondents were asked to return the questionnaire to NWA as soon as possible, in the freepost-addressed envelope provided.

- 2.7 Two postal reminder letters, including further copies of the questionnaire, were sent to non-responding applicants - on 24th October 2006, and then again on 13th November 2006.
- 2.8 In total, 93 completed questionnaires were returned to NWA prior to analysis: the overall response rate was therefore 33%.
- 2.9 Data was entered onto the Excel Template downloaded from the BVPI website.
- 2.10 NWA standard quality control procedures were applied to the entered data:
- A minimum of 10% of each operator's data was checked
 - If an error was discovered, all of the operator's data for that particular question was checked
 - If two or more further errors were discovered, all of the operator's data (i.e., for all questions) was checked.
- 2.11 Steps were then taken to validate the data for consistency and completeness:
- The 'data validation routine' included on the Excel template provided on the BVPI Website was applied, and any 'invalid' data highlighted was checked against questionnaires and corrected if necessary.
 - Checks were made to ensure that respondents had followed correct routing, and 'invalid' responses were coded '0', i.e., only those who stated 'that they had applied for planning consent previous to their most recent application' at Q3, were given 'valid' codes for Q4 and Q8.
 - The data was transferred to SPSS and frequency counts run.
- 2.12 After the data on the Excel Template had been validated, it was sent to Hertsmere Borough Council to be uploaded to the Audit Commission, via the BVPI Website. The 'survey results' as shown on the uploaded Excel Template are attached as **Appendix 2** to this report. These results show details of 'missing responses' (which in the case of Q4 and Q8 also include 'invalid' responses), and 'don't know/ not applicable' responses.

2.13 Results were also analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Tables showing counts and count percentages for the total sample, and by 'capacity in which you were acting when making your most recent application', 'type of application submitted' and whether the application was 'granted or refused permission/consent' were produced, and are attached as **Appendix 3** to this report. These tables are based on the 'valid' sample, i.e., 'missing data' has been removed from the percentage calculations. Reported results are therefore based on this 'valid' sample.

2.14 All sampling is liable to sampling error: this is based on the size of the sample, the level of response to individual questions, and the proportion of the population who are interviewed. The table below shows the '95% Confidence Intervals' for a variety of sample sizes, where the sample constitutes around 37% of the population (93 completed questionnaires: 283 applicants). This can be used as a guide to give an indication of the confidence interval relating to the overall sample and sample subgroups:

Sample Size	30	40	50	93
(Assumed Population)	(91)	(122)	(152)	(283)
	± %	± %	± %	± %
Response 50% / 50%	14.6	12.7	11.4	8.3
Response 30% or 70%	13.4	11.6	10.4	7.6
Response 10% or 90%	8.8	7.6	6.8	5.0

SURVEY RESULTS

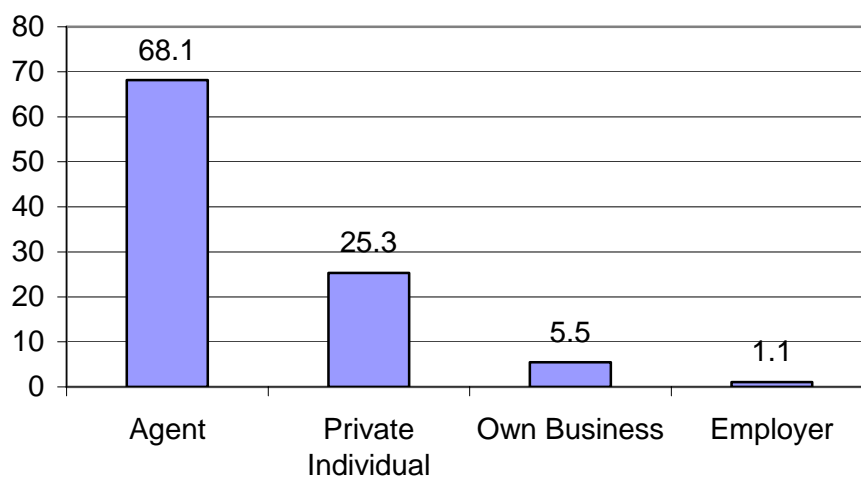
3.1 Acting capacity when making most recent application

Q1: 'When you made your most recent application, in what capacity were you acting?'

(Appendix 3 - page 1 refers)

- 3.1.1 Over two-thirds of respondents (68.1%) were acting as 'agents on behalf of another party' when they made their most recent application, whilst 25.3% were 'private individuals', 5.5% were applying 'as part of their own business' and 1.1% were acting on behalf of 'an employer'.

Q1: In what capacity were you acting?
(Q1 : % response – all respondents)

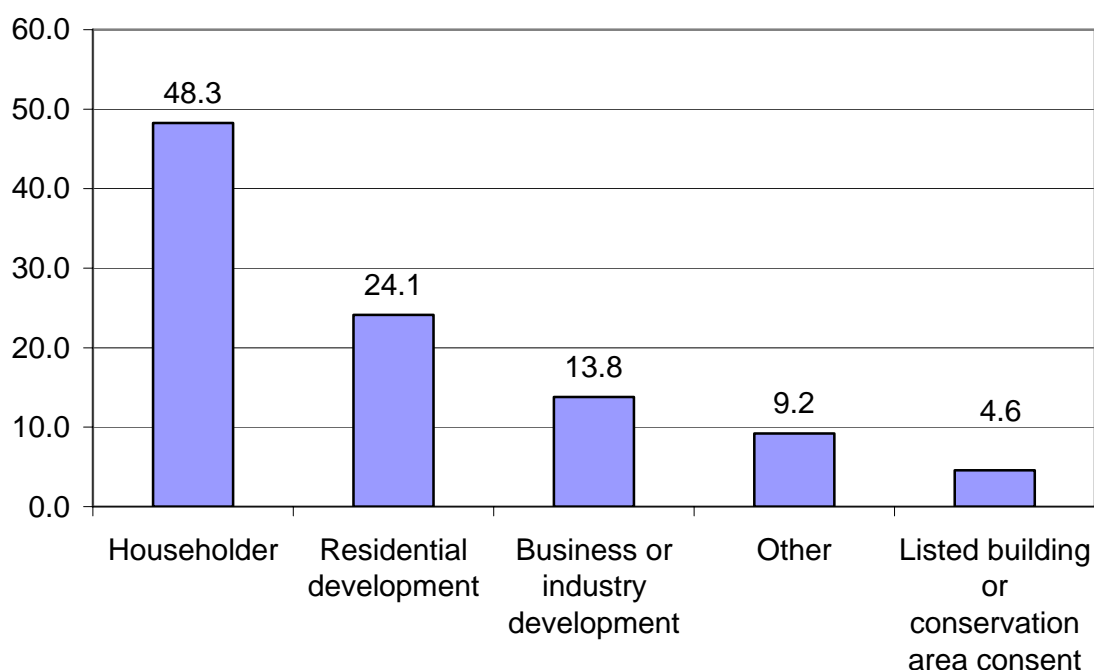


3.2 Type of Application

Q2: 'What type of application were you submitting?'
(Appendix 3 - page 2 refers)

3.2.1 Overall 48.3% of applicants had submitted a 'householder' application, whilst 24.1% had made a 'residential development' application, and 13.8% had made 'a business or industry development' application. 4.6% respondents had submitted applications for 'listed building/conservation area consent'. 9.2% of respondents indicated that they had made some 'other' kind of application: these included applications relating to 'educational establishments', 'advertisement consent' and 'leisure facilities'.

Q2: What type of application were you submitting?
(Q2: % response – all respondents)



3.3 Previous applications

Q3: 'Have you applied to Hertsmere Borough Council planning department for planning consent previous to your most recent application?'
(Appendix 3 – page 3 refers)

3.3.1 Two thirds of all respondents (66.7%) stated that they had previously applied to the Hertsmere Borough Council planning department for planning consent. 32.3% of respondents said that they had not applied for planning consent previous to their most recent application, and 1.1% could not recall if a previous application had been made.

3.4 Number of previous applications

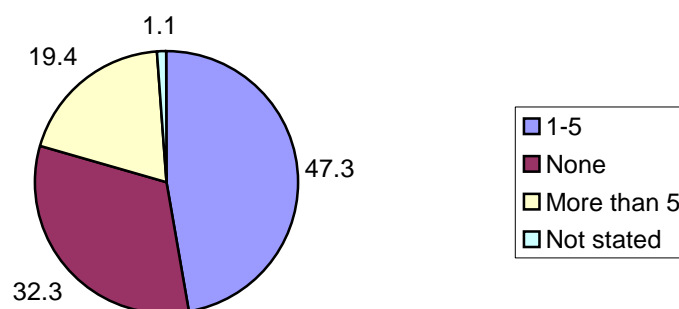
Q4: (If answered 'yes' to Q3) Please indicate how many times you have applied to Hertsmere Borough Council planning department for planning consent ... in last six months/ in last year/ in last two years/ in last three years?

(Appendix 3 - pages 3 to 5 refer)

3.4.1 Respondents who indicated at Q3 that they had 'previously applied for planning consent to the Hertsmere Borough Council planning department, were asked to indicate 'how many times they had applied to the Council's planning department for planning consent' - 'in the last six months', 'in the last year', 'in the last two years' and 'in the last three years'. However, many respondents did not give a response to all of these questions – this may have been because there was no provision for a 'not at all' response on the questionnaire, and the respondent believed the question related to the number of previous applications, not including the current application. However, we cannot be certain of this, so responses shown in the Appendix 3 tables are as received.

3.4.2 Nevertheless, recalculating these percentages over the total sample, and using the 'highest' response given at Q4 (i.e., '1-5', '6-10', '11-20', '21-50' or '51+'), suggests that 47.3% of respondents had previously applied for planning consent between '1 and 5 times' over the past three years, whilst 19.4% had applied 'more than 5 times', (9.7% '6-10 times', 7.5% '11-20 times', 1.1% '21-50 times' and 1.1% '51+ times'). A third of respondents (33.4%) had had 'no previous contact' (32.3%) or it was 'not stated' (1.1%).

No. of previous applications over last three years
(Q3/4: % of all respondents)



3.5 Attitude statements

*Q5: 'Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your experience of the Council's handling of your planning applications in the last year
(Appendix 3 - pages 5 to 15 refer)*

3.5.1 Advice and help

57.0% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly' (7.5% 'strongly agree' + 49.5% 'agree'), whilst 23.6% disagreed (11.8% 'strongly disagree' + 11.8% 'disagree'). 14.0% stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement, and 5.4% gave 'it does not apply/ don't know' responses.

3.5.2 Information about Progress of Application

33.3% of respondents agreed with the statement 'the council kept me informed about the progress of my application' (4.3% 'strongly agree' + 29.0% 'agree'), whilst 40.9% disagreed (22.6% 'strongly disagree' + 18.3% 'disagree'). 24.7% stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement, and 1.1% gave 'it does not apply/ don't know' responses.

3.5.3 Dealing with queries promptly

40.2% of respondents agreed with the statement 'the council dealt promptly with my queries' (4.3% 'strongly agree' + 35.9% 'agree'), whilst 39.1% disagreed (16.3% 'strongly disagree' + 22.8% 'disagree'). 16.3% stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement, and 4.3% gave 'it does not apply/ don't know' responses.

3.5.4 Understanding decision made

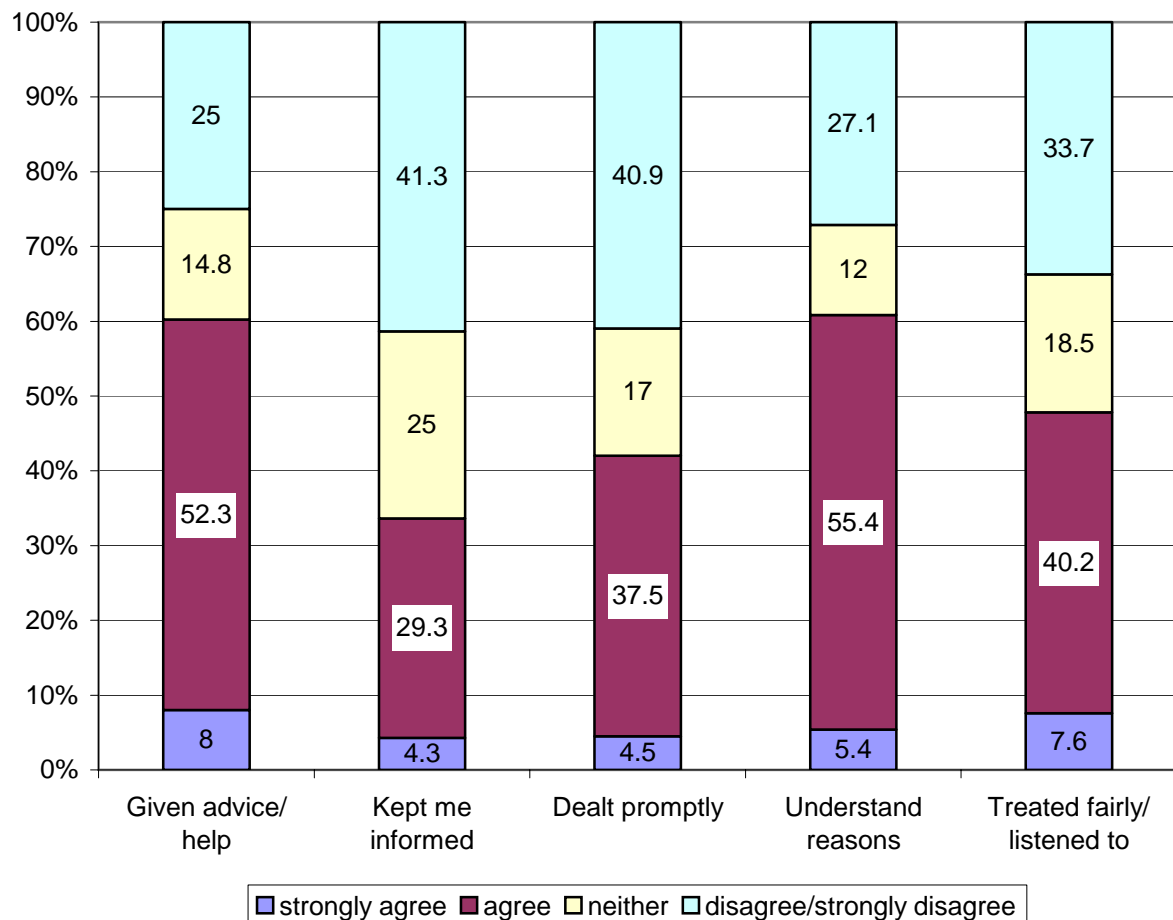
60.2% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I understand the reasons for the decision made on my application(s)' (5.4% 'strongly agree' + 54.8% 'agree'), whilst 26.9% disagreed (14.0% 'strongly disagree' + 12.9% 'disagree'). 11.8% stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement, and 1.1% gave 'it does not apply/ don't know' responses.

3.5.5 Fair treatment

47.3% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I felt that I was treated fairly and that my viewpoint was listened to' (7.5% 'strongly agree' + 39.8% 'agree'), whilst 33.3% disagreed (16.1% 'strongly disagree' + 17.2% 'disagree'). 18.3% stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement, and 1.1% gave 'it does not apply/ don't know' responses.

3.5.6 Analysis of responses *from those who expressed an agreement*, (i.e., excluding ‘it does not apply/ don’t know’ responses), reveals that agreement was highest (60.8%) for the statement ‘I understand the reasons for the decision made on my application’ (5.4% ‘strongly agree’ + 55.4% ‘agree’).

Q5: Agree/ disagree statements regarding Council’s handling of planning applications in the last year
 (%s excluding ‘it does not apply/ don’t know’ responses)



3.5.7 Agreement was lowest (33.6%) for the statement ‘the Council kept me informed about the progress of my application’ (4.3% ‘strongly agree’ + 29.3% ‘agree’).

3.5.8 Disagreement was highest for the statements ‘the Council kept me informed about the progress of my application’, (41.3% either disagreed or strongly disagreed) and ‘the council dealt promptly with my queries’ (40.9% either disagreed or strongly disagreed); disagreement was lowest for the statement ‘I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly’, (25% either disagreed or strongly disagreed).

3.6 **Satisfaction with service provided**

Q6: 'Setting aside whether any individual application was successful or not, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the service provided by the Council in processing your application?'

(Appendix 2 - page 15 & 16 refer)

- 3.6.1 51.6% of all respondents expressed satisfaction 'with the service provided by the Council in processing their application' (12.9% 'very satisfied' + 38.7% 'fairly satisfied'), whilst 17.2% reported that they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' and 31.2% expressed dissatisfaction (19.4% 'very dissatisfied' + 11.8% 'fairly dissatisfied').

BVPI 111 OVERALL SATISFACTION					
Group	Satisfied	95% Confidence Interval	Base No. (100%)	Neither satisfied /dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
<u>2006: all respondents:</u>	51.6%	± 10.2%	93	(17.2%)	(31.2%)

Note: The 95% Confidence Intervals shown in the above table, are as calculated by the Audit Commission, and are based on an 'infinite' population.

Recalculating the Confidence Interval to take account of the fact that the 93 of a total of 283 applicants gave a response, gives a 95% Confidence Interval of ± 8.3%.

3.7 **Outcome of application**

Q7: 'Was your most recent application - granted/refused (permission/consent)?'

(Appendix 3, page 16 refers)

- 3.7.1 68.1% of respondents reported that they had been granted permission/consent for their most recent application, and 31.9% had been refused permission or consent.

3.8 Service Improvement

(Only respondents who had made more than one application in the last three years) Q8: *'For each of the following elements of the planning service provided by Hertsmere Borough Council, please indicate whether you think the service has got better or worse over the last three years, or has it stayed the same?'*

(Appendix 3, pages 17 to 20 refer)

3.8.1 Two thirds (66.7%) of the total sample (62 out of 93 respondents) stated that they had made more than one application in the last three years. The following analysis of the responses to Q8 is restricted to those who expressed an opinion – i.e., excluding 'missing' and 'don't know' responses.

3.8.2 Advice and help

The majority (65.4%) of those (52 respondents) who expressed an opinion, were of the view that 'the advice and help provided to applicants' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. 11.5% of respondents thought that it had 'got better', compared to 23.1% who thought it had got 'worse'.

3.8.3 Information provided about progress

The majority (60.0%) of those (55 respondents) who expressed an opinion, were of the view that 'the information provided about the progress of applications' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. 9.1% of respondents thought that it had 'got better', compared to 30.9% who thought it had got 'worse'.

3.8.4 Dealing with queries promptly

Over half (56.4%) of those (55 respondents) who expressed an opinion, were of the view that 'the promptness with which queries about applications were dealt' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years, whilst 7.3% thought it had 'got better', and 36.4% thought that it had got 'worse'.

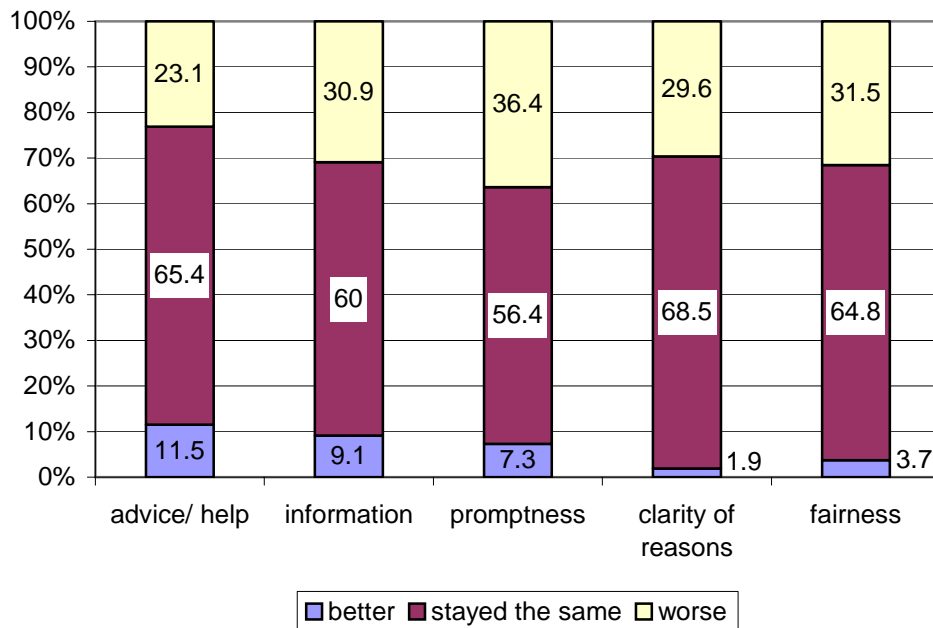
3.8.5 Clarity of reasons given for decision

The majority (68.5%) of those (54 respondents) who expressed an opinion, were of the view that 'the clarity of the reasons for the decisions given' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. 1.9% of respondents thought that it had 'got better', compared to 29.6% who thought it had got 'worse'.

3.8.6 Fairness with which application was dealt

Two thirds (64.8%) of those (54 respondents) who expressed an opinion, were of the view that the 'fairness with which the application was dealt' had 'stayed the same' over the last three years. However, 3.7% thought that it had 'got better'; whereas 31.5% thought it had got 'worse'.

Perceived change in service over past three years
(Q8: % response – those who expressed an opinion)
(Analysis excluding 'don't know' responses)



3.9 Additional comments

- 3.9.1 Respondents were asked if they had any other comments that they wished to make, and 35.3% of respondents did so. Comments were diverse and are listed in full in **Appendix 4**, sorted by whether they made 'wholly positive', 'partly positive', 'negative' or 'other' comments with regard to the Council's planning department. In total 33 respondents made comments, 2 of those made 'wholly positive' comments, 1 respondent made a 'partly positive' comment and 24 made 'negative' comments. 6 respondents made 'other' comments.

4.0 PROFILE OF THE ACHIEVED SAMPLE

(Appendix 3, pages 21 to 23 refer)

- 4.1 Over three-quarters of respondents were male (83.7%), while only 16.3% of respondents were female.
- 4.2 Almost half (45.6%) of respondents were 'employees' (full time 40.2%, part time 5.4%), whilst 46.7% were 'self-employed'.
- 4.3 7.8% of all respondents said that they had a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity, (7 respondents). Of these respondents, two went on to say that their illness or disability limits their activity.
- 4.4 The majority respondents gave their ethnic group as 'White – British' (87.6%), 5.6% as 'White Irish' or 'White Other', 1.1% as 'Black/Black-British-African', 3.4% as 'Indian', 1.1% as 'Pakistani' and 1.1% gave their ethnic group as 'Other Asian'.