



District Councils' Network survey on benefits services

The District Councils' Network surveyed its membership on the benefits services they provide and the importance of these services now and in the future. At the time of the survey the DCN had 170 Councils in membership and received 110 responses. This level of response is unprecedented and shows that the delivery of benefits is important.

What you told us:

All councils provide at least one access location for face to face benefits advice. 62% of respondents provide two or more, with larger rural districts providing up to six locations, including part time benefit surgeries. Though it was not asked specifically many responses indicated that they provided home visits for their most vulnerable members of the community.

87% responded positively to the question 'Do you link face to face advice with back office support and access to other agencies?' Agencies and services include DWP (including PS & JCP), debt advice, free school meals, Blue Badge, energy advice, concessionary travel, housing, local advice centres (voluntary sector) and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

The percentage of face to face services ranges from 20% to 80% of all contact, excluding correspondence received by post.

When asked if councils anticipated a rise in face to face contact, 73% of respondents said yes. In response to why they anticipated a rise the reasons given were:

- Between April 2011 and introduction of Universal Credit we have to implement a number of changes which reduce customers' benefits and which will mean face to face contact increases eg, non dep increases, reductions in LHA rates, single room extended to 35yr olds, restrictions on room sizes for social housing, replacement to council tax benefit.
- There is and continues to be a greater demand for benefits due to the continuing economic conditions.

Councils were asked 'For what reasons do you believe face to face contact is important in administering benefit claims?'

- HB/CTB are the most complex of the current welfare benefits and regulations change regularly. Customers often need to have the ability to discuss these complex issues face-to-face and it is an excellent way of ensuring that vulnerable people understand both their entitlement and their obligations.
- It is a prime way of ensuring that not only are people getting the correct amount of HB and/or CTB, but that they are also receiving all the welfare benefits they are entitled to.
- Where services are delivered locally, local knowledge can also sign post people to other services or organisations that may assist them and can provide a far more holistic service.