



Research Report-Draft



Customer Services Standards – Mystery Shopping

Prepared for: Hyndburn Borough
Council

Customer Services Standards – Mystery Shopping

Prepared for: Hyndburn Borough Council

Prepared by: Clare Roberts, Associate Director

July 2009



Produced by **BMG Research**

© **Bostock Marketing Group Ltd, 2009**

www.bmgresearch.co.uk

Project:

Registered in England No. 2841970

Registered office:

7 Holt Court North
Heneage Street West
Aston Science Park
Birmingham
B7 4AX
UK

Tel: +44 (0) 121 3336006

UK VAT Registration No. 580 6606 32

Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Member No. B4626

Market Research Society Company Partner

ESOMAR Member (The World Association of Research Professionals)

British Quality Foundation Member

Market Research Quality Standards Association (British Standards Institute) BS7911 for Market Research -
Certificate No. FS76713

Investors in People Standard - Certificate No. WMQC 0614

Interviewer Quality Control Scheme (IQCS) Member Company

Registered under the Data Protection Act - Registration No. Z5081943

Table of Contents

1	Executive summary.....	1
1.1	Background and method.....	1
1.2	Methodology.....	1
1.3	Face to face findings.....	1
1.3.1	Location of the office.....	1
1.3.2	Inside the office.....	1
1.3.3	Aspects of the office.....	1
1.3.4	First person spoken to.....	2
1.3.5	Second person spoken to.....	2
1.3.6	Response to enquiry.....	2
1.3.7	Satisfaction with visit.....	2
1.3.8	Feeling valued and treated fairly.....	2
1.3.9	Overall service.....	2
1.4	Telephone findings.....	3
1.4.1	Contact information.....	3
1.4.2	Call greeting.....	3
1.5	Content of the call.....	3
1.5.1	Required information.....	3
1.5.2	Length of call.....	3
1.5.3	Call experience.....	4
1.5.4	Ending the call.....	4
1.5.5	Overall experience of the call.....	4
1.6	E-mail findings.....	4
1.6.1	Website.....	4
1.6.2	Notification of receipt.....	5
1.6.3	Response to enquiry.....	5
1.6.4	Interaction and advice received.....	5
1.6.5	Overall service received.....	5
2	Introduction.....	8
2.1	Background and objectives.....	8
2.2	Methodology.....	8

2.2.1	Face to face mystery shops	8
2.2.2	Telephone mystery shops	9
2.2.3	E-mail enquiries	9
2.2.4	Panel members.....	9
2.2.5	Scenarios.....	11
2.2.6	Evaluation forms	11
3	Findings - Face-to-Face	12
3.1	Introduction	12
3.2	Locating the office.....	12
3.2.1	Getting into the office	12
3.3	Inside the Office	12
3.3.1	Aspects of the office environment	13
3.4	First person spoken to / person behind the counter.....	15
3.5	Second person spoken to	16
3.6	Overall assessment	17
3.6.1	Telephone numbers	17
3.6.2	Leaflets	17
3.6.3	Response to enquiry	17
3.6.4	Satisfaction with visit.....	17
3.6.5	Feeling valued and treated fairly	18
3.6.6	Overall service	18
4	Findings - Telephone	19
4.1	Introduction	19
4.2	Contact information.....	19
4.2.1	Call greeting	20
4.3	Content of the call.....	22
4.3.1	Required information.....	22
4.3.2	Length of call	22
4.3.3	Call experience	22
4.3.4	Anything else they could do for you	23
4.3.5	Result of the call	23
4.3.6	Ending the call	25
4.3.7	Overall experience of the call.....	26
5	Findings - E-mail	28

5.1	Introduction	28
5.2	Council website.....	28
5.3	Wait times.....	29
5.3.1	Notification of receipt	29
5.3.2	Response to enquiry	29
5.3.3	Interaction and advice received	29
5.3.4	Leaflets.....	31
5.4	Overall service received.....	31
6	Conclusions and recommendations	33
6.1	Overview.....	33

Table of Figures

Figure 1	Aspects of the Office (All shoppers)	13
Figure 2	Initial contact with call handler (valid responses only)	20
Figure 3	Verbal information (valid responses only).....	22
Figure 4	Aspects of the call (valid responses only).....	24
Figure 5	Staff response to enquiry	31

Table of Tables

Table 1	Contact method.....	8
Table 2	Face to face contact point	8
Table 3	E-mail contacts.....	9
Table 4	Profile of panel members.....	10
Table 5	Contacts by scenario group.....	19
Table 6	Call handler (valid responses only).....	25
Table 7	Point of contact	28
Table 8	Time taken to respond.....	29
Table 9	Response to enquiry	30
Table 10	Rating of staff response	30

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Background and method

BMG Research was commissioned by Hyndburn Borough Council to undertake a mystery shopping exercise to assist in the development of the Customer Care Standards and to determine the customer service levels currently being experienced by residents contacting the Council via, telephone, face to face and e-mail.

1.2 Methodology

The mystery shopping consisted of face-to-face visits to council offices, telephone calls to the different service areas and e-mail enquiries.

A total of 50 mystery shops were undertaken. Mystery shops were completed at three Council contact points; Cannon Street, Scaitcliffe House and the Town Hall. The table below shows the number of mystery shops completed at each of the contact points.

A total of 76 telephone mystery shops were undertaken by both members of the Council's Citizen Panel and interviewers from BMG research. Interviewers and Panellists were fully briefed before the mystery shopping exercise commenced and were provided with details of the service area they were contacting and the information and advice they could expect to receive.

1.3 Face to face findings

1.3.1 Location of the office

The majority (90%) of shoppers found it easy to locate the office in which they were undertaking their mystery shop. One in twelve shoppers (8%) found it difficult to locate the office, while 2% of shoppers said it was neither easy nor difficult. Of those who found it difficult to locate an office, two mystery shoppers found it very or fairly difficult to locate the Cannon Street Office, one the Town Hall and one Scaitcliffe.

1.3.2 Inside the office

Once inside the office, the largest proportion (50%) of shoppers found there was one member of staff behind the counter, while more than a quarter (28%) found two members of staff and one in ten (10%) reported three members of staff behind the counter. Five mystery shoppers (10%) found no one available to answer their query when they arrived; two instances at the Town Hall and Scaitcliffe and one instance at Cannon Street.

1.3.3 Aspects of the office

Shoppers rated the offices very highly (very/fairly good) in terms of cleanliness (98%), the appearance of staff (94%) and overall appearance of the office (84%). However, some aspects of the offices were rated less favourably. A quarter (26%) rated the visibility of emergency contact details as poor, while 16% rated the friendliness of the atmosphere and 14% rated the visibility of opening hours as poor.

1.3.4 First person spoken to

The largest proportion (44%) of shoppers was spoken to immediately by the person behind the counter and did not have to wait. A fifth (20%) of shoppers had to wait one minute before being spoken to, while 10% waited two minutes. A quarter of shoppers (26%) waited three minutes or more including three shoppers who waited 40 minutes or more before being spoken to (Town Hall).

Before seeing a second person, 69% of shoppers said the first person did all they could to deal with their query, while approaching a third (31%) did not feel the first person did all they could to deal with their enquiry.

1.3.5 Second person spoken to

Before seeing a second person, 69% of shoppers said the first person did all they could to deal with their query, while approaching a third (31%) did not feel the first person did all they could to deal with their enquiry.

The largest proportion (50%) of shoppers waited one minute before being spoken to by the second person; 8% were seen immediately while the remainder waited two minutes or more. One shopper waited 10 minutes before being spoken to by a second person.

1.3.6 Response to enquiry

The majority (88%) of mystery shoppers felt they were given a good response to their enquiry (57% very good); 2% felt the response was neither good nor poor and 10% felt it was poor.

Where shoppers said the response to their enquiry was very good this was often down to the staff member being seen as friendly polite and willing to help. Shoppers rating the response as good were also impressed by the level of interest staff showed in them and how seriously their enquiry was taken.

1.3.7 Satisfaction with visit

Similarly to the aforementioned results, 88% were satisfied with the outcome of their visit (48% very satisfied); 2% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 10% were very/fairly dissatisfied.

1.3.8 Feeling valued and treated fairly

In total, 84% of shoppers felt valued as a customer; 6% felt 'not very valued' and 2% not at all valued. In terms of being treated fairly, 57% of shoppers agreed strongly that they were treated fairly; 33% agreed they were treated fairly; 4% neither agreed nor disagreed and 6% disagreed they were treated fairly by staff.

1.3.9 Overall service

Overall, 88% of shoppers rated the overall quality of the service they received as good (47% as very good); 2% of shoppers felt the quality of service was neither good nor poor; 2% thought the service was fairly poor and 8% considered the service to be very poor.

1.4 Telephone findings

A total of 76 mystery shops were completed by telephone; 30 by researchers from BMG and 46 by panellists. Telephone mystery shops made by interviewers from BMG were more general in nature, while those completed by members of the Citizen Panel were more specific and often resulted in a follow up action, such as the delivery or collection of an item.

1.4.1 Contact information

The majority (87%) of shoppers got through on the first attempt, with 13% of shoppers having to make a second attempt.

Of the shoppers that experienced an unsuccessful call in the first instance, the reasons for abandoning the call included waiting for more than 10 rings for the phone to be answered and an engaged tone. A further two calls were abandoned on the second attempt because the call was not answered (this has reduced the base on some questions to 74).

Where the shoppers recorded the number of rings before the call was answered, 45% of calls were answered in one ring and 27% in two rings. Overall, 94% of calls were answered in 10 rings or less. However, some mystery shoppers let the phone ring longer than this, with one call being answered after 36 rings.

Where the time taken to answer the call was recorded in seconds, 63% of calls were answered in 20 seconds or less, with one call being answered immediately. However, 37% of calls measured in seconds took longer than 10 seconds to be answered, with some mystery shoppers letting the phone ring for more than two minutes.

1.4.2 Call greeting

The majority (73%) of shoppers reported that when the call was answered the call handler said 'Hello /Good Morning / Good Afternoon'. One in seven (14%) shoppers said the call handler gave their name and 49% were asked 'How can I help you?' The Council was mentioned by the call handler in 82% of instances. The majority (92%) of shoppers said that the call handler sounded ready to take their call.

1.5 Content of the call

1.5.1 Required information

Half (50%) of shoppers, providing a valid response, reported that the call handler fully provided the requisite information listed on the instruction sheet, while 40% felt the requisite information was partially provided. One in ten (10%) shoppers reported that none of the required information was provided.

Additional information was offered by the call handler in 32% of instances, while the majority of shoppers (68%) said no additional information was offered.

1.5.2 Length of call

The largest proportion of shoppers (33%) said their conversation lasted two minutes; more than a quarter (27%) of conversations lasted one minute; a fifth (19%) lasted

three minutes while 18% lasted four minutes or more. In two instances, the call lasted less than one minute.

1.5.3 Call experience

Shoppers rated all aspects of the verbal information they were given highly. More than four fifths rated the ease of understanding and appropriateness of the information as good; 86% and 84% respectively. Approaching three quarters rated the overall quality of information provided as good (74%) while 71% of shoppers said the quantity of information was good. However, one in ten shoppers rated the overall quality of information and the quantity of information as poor.

Shoppers reported that occasionally the call handlers appeared unsure about the information they were providing (10% occasionally, 3% throughout) or left the shopper unsure as what would happen next (12% occasionally). Shoppers also reported the call handler not listening carefully (8% occasionally and 1% throughout) and appearing to be distracted by a colleague or something else (4% occasionally and 1% throughout).

1.5.4 Ending the call

The majority (85%) of shoppers said that the call handler said goodbye at the end of the call and approaching two thirds (63%) said 'thank you'. More than a quarter (28%) of the call handlers summarised the call and actions to be taken; 51% asked if there was anything else they could do to help and 21% checked that they had answered the query satisfactorily. Worryingly, 4% of staff ended the call without any sign off at all.

1.5.5 Overall experience of the call

Three quarters (74%) of shoppers rated their overall quality of the call as good (43% very good). However, 12% of shoppers rated their overall call experience as poor

1.6 E-mail findings

In addition to the telephone and face to face mystery shops, 52 further mystery shops were undertaken via e-mail. All e-mail enquiries were undertaken by the research team at BMG.

1.6.1 Website

Of those shoppers rating the Council's website two thirds (43%) said it was very easy to find the relevant page; 35% found it fairly easy; 4% said it was neither easy nor difficult and 18% found it fairly difficult to find the relevant page on the website.

Shoppers were then asked how easy or difficult it was to find the answer to their query on the relevant web page. Almost half (49%) of shoppers said they found it easy to find the answer to their enquiry via the website (16% very easy); 37% found it difficult to some degree and 14% said it was neither easy nor difficult to find the answer to their enquiry on the website. Shoppers who found it difficult to find the answer to their enquiry on the website were completing scenarios related to Waste, Planning, Council Tax and Environment.

1.6.2 Notification of receipt

Only two shoppers received a notification of receipt of their enquiry, with both of these being received via e-mail. One of these notifications was received within two hours and the other within two days. Only one of the notifications said who would be dealing with the enquiry, but did not provide the contact details for this person.

1.6.3 Response to enquiry

Overall, 23% of shoppers received a response to their enquiry within minutes; 58% within hours and 19% within days.

1.6.4 Interaction and advice received

In the majority of instances (92%) shoppers reported that the staff member who responded to their enquiry used positive language, with staff responding to an e-mail enquiry most likely to use positive language. Staff responded to a postal enquiry were less likely to use positive language.

Overall, 79% of shoppers rated the way staff responded to their enquiry as good, with 50% rating it as very good. One in seven shoppers (15%) rated the way in which staff responded as neither good nor poor and 6% rated staff response to their enquiry as fairly poor.

1.6.5 Overall service received

The way in which staff responded to the enquiry was rated most highly for politeness with 94% of shoppers rating this aspect as good. Staff were also rated highly for how seriously the enquiry was taken (92%) and their efficiency and speed (88%). Overall, all aspects of the contact was rated by more than four fifths of shoppers as good.

The majority of shoppers (90%) said that staff took ownership of the enquiry, while one in ten (10%) thought this was not the case. Three quarters of shoppers (76%) did not feel that staff went the extra mile for them.

1.7 Benchmarking

When the results for the overall service received from Hyndburn Borough Council's mystery shopping exercise are compared to those of another local authority they show that the Council is performing very favourably.

However, the comparison council did perform better for answering phone calls, with no second attempts being made and no calls were cancelled. The primary difference with the methodology was that instead of all calls going via a customer call centre, the phone calls for the comparison council were made to individual departments.

Table 1 Benchmark with comparison council

	Hyndburn	Comparison Council	Difference
Overall service received (Face to Face)	88%	70%	+18%
Overall service received (Telephone)	74%	75%	-1
Overall service received (E-mail)	87%	73% (includes post and web enquiries)	+14%

1.7.1 Face to face

With regard to the face to face visits Hyndburn was rated higher than the comparison council for aspects of the offices such as appearance of staff (94% compared to 85%), Cleanliness (98% / 80%) and overall appearance of the office (84% / 75%). However, the comparison council was rated higher for friendliness of atmosphere (66% / 75%), size (76% / 80%) and visibility of opening hours (58% / 65%).

Mystery shoppers visiting one of the Hyndburn Council offices were almost more likely than shoppers visiting the offices of the comparison council to feel valued (84% compared to 75%) and report that they were treated fairly (90% compared to 75%).

1.7.2 Telephone

When aspects of the service received by mystery shoppers contacting the council's by telephone, the comparison council out performs Hyndburn on a number of aspects.

Table 2 Aspects of the call – comparison council

	Hyndburn	Comparison Council	Difference
How easy it was to talk to them	85%	89%	-4%
How helpful they were	76%	79%	-3%
How polite/courteous they were	85%	89%	-4%
The level of interest they showed in you	68%	87%	-19%
How comfortable they made you feel	72%	83%	-11%
The extent to which they seemed to take you seriously	79%	92%	-13%
The way in which they asked you questions	68%	78%	-10%
The way in which they responded to your questions	74%	81%	-7%
The extent to which they seemed to value your enquiry	71%	87%	-16%
The staff overall	75%	75%	0

1.7.3 E-mail

It is difficult to directly compare the results for Hyndburn and the comparison council as the methodology was different with the results for the comparison council also including the evaluation of postal and web enquiry mystery shops.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background and objectives

BMG Research was commissioned by Hyndburn Borough Council to undertake a mystery shopping exercise to assist in the development of the Customer Service Standards and to determine the customer service levels currently being experienced by residents contacting the Council via, telephone, face to face and e-mail.

2.2 Methodology

The mystery shopping consisted of face-to-face visits to council offices, telephone calls to the different service areas and e-mail enquiries. The following table sets out the number of mystery shops by contact method:

Table 3 Contact method

Contact Method	Number of shops	Mystery Shopper
Face to Face	50	Panel members
Telephone	76	30 BMG and 46 Panel
E-mail	52	BMG

2.2.1 Face to face mystery shops

A total of 50 mystery shops were undertaken. Mystery shops were completed at three Council contact points; Cannon Street, Scaitcliffe House and the Town Hall. The table below shows the number of mystery shops completed at each of the contact points.

Table 4 Face to face contact point

Contact Point	Number of shops
Cannon Street	17
Scaitcliffe	8
Town Hall	25

2.2.2 Telephone mystery shops

A total of 76 telephone mystery shops were undertaken by both members of the Council's Citizen Panel and interviewers from BMG research. Interviewers and Panellists were fully briefed before the mystery shopping exercise commenced and were provided with details of the service area they were contacting and the information and advice they could expect to receive. The mystery shops telephone calls were all made to the switchboard; 01254 388111. A total of eight scenario groups were used.

2.2.3 E-mail enquiries

A total of 52 e-mail enquiries were undertaken by researchers at BMG. Three main e-mail points of contact were used and Table 3 below shows the break down by contact point.

Table 5 E-mail contacts

Contact point	No of e-mails
enquiries@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	30
env_health@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	11
Planning@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	11
Total	52

2.2.4 Panel members

The mystery shops were completed by both researchers at BMG and members of the Council's Citizen Panel and Benefits and Waste panels, who volunteered to take part in the research. Panellists were recruited by BMG's Qualitative Booking team.

In total, 25 panel members participated in the research after attending one of two briefing sessions held on the 2nd April. To give all panellists an opportunity to participate, one briefing session was held in the afternoon and one in the evening. The briefing sessions lasted 1.5 hours.

Panellists were asked to undertake a minimum of one face to face and one telephone mystery shop, although some panellists volunteered to undertake more than this.

Table 6 Profile of panel members

Panel Member	Gender	Age	Occupational Status	Children
1	Male	35	Full-time	1
2	Female	61	Retired	0
3	Female	43	Self employed	0
4	Female	51	Full time	0
5	Female	40	Full time	1
6	Female	79	Full time	0
7	Female	54	Full time	0
8	Female	39	Full time	0
9	Male	58	Full time	1
10	Female	30	Full time	3
11	Female	61	Retired	0
12	Male			
13	Male	70	Retired	0
14	Female	40	Full time	0
15	Female	52	Full time	0
16	Female	30	Home maker	2
17	Female	61	Retired	0
18	Male	56	Long term sick / disabled	0
19	Male	64	Part time	0
20	Female	45	Full time	1
21	Female	64	Part time	0
22	Female	64	Retired	0
23	Male	70	Retired	0
24	Male	40	Part time	0
25	Male			

2.2.5 Scenarios

A series of scenarios were developed by Hyndburn Borough Council in conjunction with BMG Research. The scenarios were designed to reflect the everyday requests for information and queries that each of the service areas regularly receive. On average, three to four scenarios were developed for each service area. In some instances the scenarios differed in accordance with the contact method, for example scenarios for some of the telephone mystery shops requested information, or provided the opportunity for the Council to send something to the shopper, while the scenarios developed for the telephone mystery shops conducted by BMG were more general.

To assist in the completion of the mystery shops, panellists undertaking the face to face and telephone shops were provided with a briefing sheet outlining the title of their scenario, the details of the contact point or address they would be using, things to consider when undertaking the mystery shop, details of the scenario and the information and advice that should be provided by staff in response to their enquiry.

2.2.6 Evaluation forms

Following the completion of each mystery shop researchers and panellists completed an evaluation form to record their experience, customer service levels and quality of information that was received. The evaluation forms were designed to capture information relating directly to particular aspects to assist in the development of the Customer Service Standards.

As a thank you for their time and as recompense for travel expenses etc, panellists received a £10 high street voucher for each completed mystery shop and evaluation form returned. All panellists were provided with freepost envelopes to return their completed evaluation forms to BMG.

3 Findings - Face-to-Face

3.1 Introduction

A total of 50 face to face mystery shops were undertaken by volunteers recruited from Hyndburn Council's Citizen and Waste and Benefits Panel. The mystery shops were undertaken at one of three contact points; Cannon Street, Scaitcliffe House and the Town Hall.

3.2 Locating the office

The majority (90%) of shoppers found it easy to locate the office in which they were undertaking their mystery shop. One in twelve shoppers (8%) found it difficult to locate the office, while 2% of shoppers said it was neither easy nor difficult. Of those who found it difficult to locate an office, two mystery shoppers found it very or fairly difficult to locate the Cannon Street Office, one the Town Hall and one Scaitcliffe.

'I went into the town hall front entrance. There was no sign post and I had to ask where to go.'

'It was not on a main road and no-one seemed to know where it was.'

'There was a very sharp turn on a disabled ramp.'

'There was bad parking that was coupled with steep ramps. In addition the internal door was difficult for me to use.'

3.2.1 Getting into the office

The majority (96%) of shoppers found it fairly or very easy to get into the office, with only 4% (n=2) having any difficulty. Of those finding it difficult, both shoppers were trying to access Scaitcliffe House. Reasons included:

'There was bad parking that was coupled with steep ramps. In addition the internal door was difficult for me to use'

It was difficult due to a steep ramp

3.3 Inside the Office

Once inside the office, the largest proportion (50%) of shoppers found there was one member of staff behind the counter, while more than a quarter (28%) found two members of staff and one in ten (10%) reported three members of staff behind the counter. Five mystery shoppers (10%) found no one available to answer their query when they arrived; two instances at the Town Hall and Scaitcliffe and one instance at Cannon Street.

The largest proportions of shoppers found there were no visitors (40%) or four or more (22%) visitors in the room/area where the counter was located, while 14% found two, 12% found one and 10% noted three visitors. Shoppers visiting The Town Hall noted the highest numbers of visitors, while shoppers visiting Scaitcliffe were most likely to have encountered no other visitors.

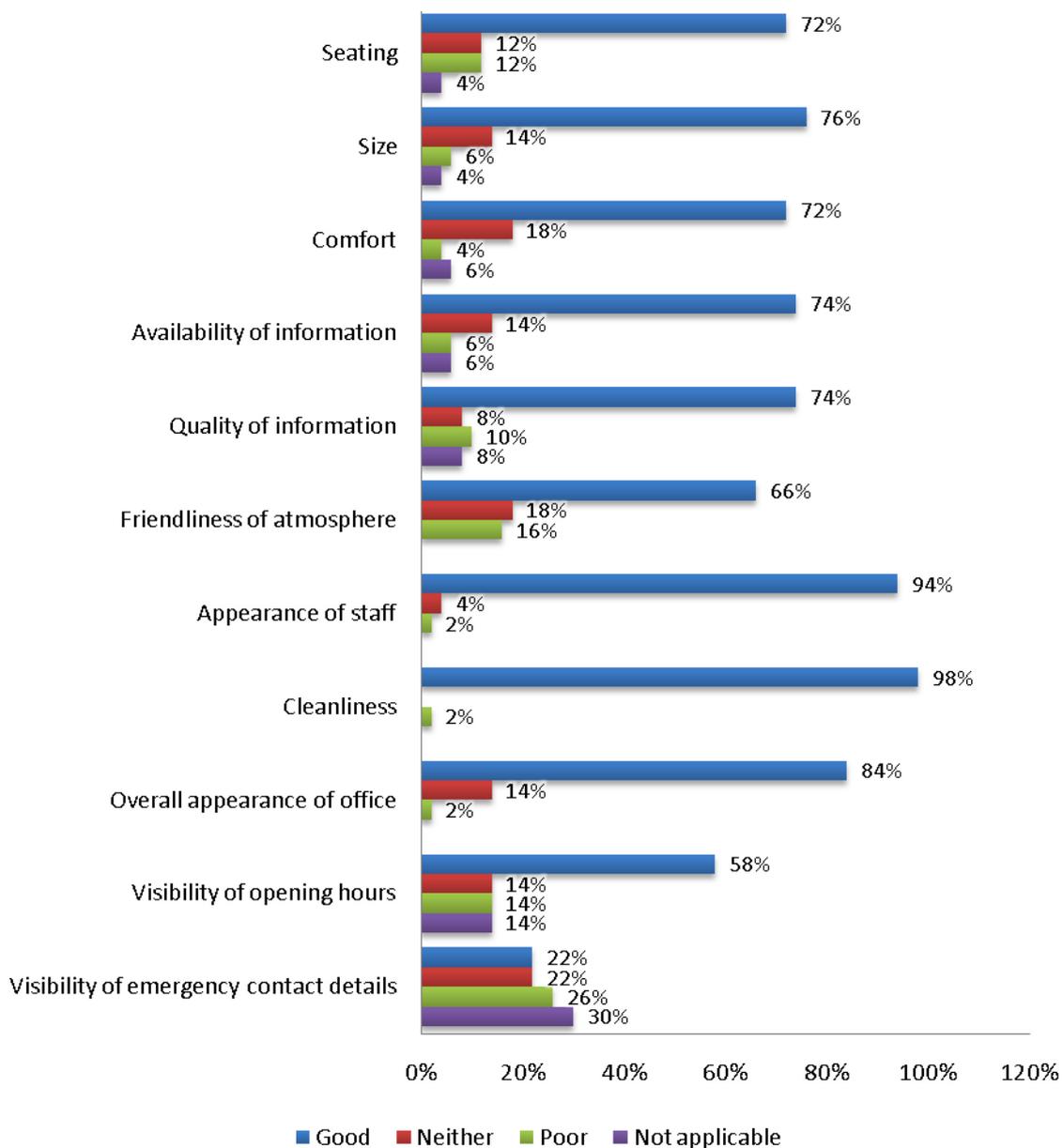
In total, 56% of shoppers found there to be sufficient seating available for visitors; 30% stated sufficient seating was not applicable as there were no other visitors and 14% (n=7) said there was insufficient seating; five instances at the Town Hall and two instances at Scaitcliffe.

Further to this 66% of shoppers said the area in which the counter was located was large enough to accommodate the number of visitors, while the remaining 34% of shoppers said this was not applicable as there were no other visitors.

3.3.1 Aspects of the office environment

Shoppers were asked to rate different aspects of the office environment in terms of how good or poor they considered these aspects to be.

Figure 1 Aspects of the Office (All shoppers)



UnWeighted sample base = 50

Shoppers rated the offices very highly (very/fairly good) in terms of cleanliness (98%), the appearance of staff (94%) and overall appearance of the office (84%). However, some aspects of the offices were rated less favourably. A quarter (26%) rated the visibility of emergency contact details as poor, while 16% rated the friendliness of the atmosphere and 14% rated the visibility of opening hours as poor.

Comments made by shoppers regarding the office environment included:

There was no indication of a formal reception. Unfortunately, it was more of a sales counter

The waiting area was narrow, so the people who were waiting and seated were only one metre or so away from people enquiring at the counter (could hear the enquiry).

The town hall entrance is quite daunting. It's a very big building and for someone that is afraid of entering such buildings then it could put them off. It's not clear where the receptionist/ticket sales are. The person is free to wonder around the ground floor trying to find what they want rather than clear directional signage that points you in the right direction

The benefits office entrance had lots of litter and leaves blown in from the outside which, looked very untidy. The display with the forms also looked untidy

On a busy day two chairs might not have been enough. However, is there room for more? I think probably not.

It was welcoming and had a friendly atmosphere.

It was nicely decorated and large enough to hold a great number of visitors in a relaxed environment

It was a little bit sparse and like a typical council office, not a very inviting place given the subject matter. It did not feel very private either. I am glad there was nobody else in the office when I made my visit.

I found the room a little intimidating and frightening for someone with poor literacy skills. There's no reception area. There is just a sign to get a ticket from a box on the wall which is at a height that might cause problems for someone in a wheel chair. I waited for over 40 minutes to be called. I was told the swipe card would not be of any use to me. Several people had got fed up and left before their numbers were called.

3.4 First person spoken to / person behind the counter

The largest proportion (44%) of shoppers was spoken to immediately by the person behind the counter and did not have to wait. A fifth (20%) of shoppers had to wait one minute before being spoken to, while 10% waited two minutes. A quarter of shoppers (26%) waited three minutes or more including three shoppers who waited 40 minutes or more before being spoken to (Town Hall).

The first person spoken to by the majority (70%) of shoppers was the receptionist, while a quarter (24%) spoke to a Council Officer. However, 2% of shoppers were unsure who they had spoken to initially and couldn't easily distinguish between the receptionists and Council Officers.

The majority (56%) of shoppers found that the first person they had spoken to was *not* wearing an identification tag. A quarter (24%) found that staff were wearing identification tags while 20% of shoppers could not recall if the first member of staff they spoke was wearing an identification tag.

Approaching nine out of ten shoppers (86%) were greeted and asked 'Can I help you?', while one in seven (14%) said they were not greeted (Town Hall and Cannon Street).

The majority of mystery shoppers rated their initial contact with the first person they spoke to as good (very and fairly good) in terms of:

- Friendliness (88%)
- Helpfulness (90%);
- Courteousness (96%)
- Interest in visitor (76%); 12% neither good nor poor
- Interest in enquiry (82%); 12% neither good nor poor
- How serious the enquiry was taken (82%); 16% neither good nor poor
- Being sympathetic (76%); 20% neither good nor poor
- The amount of eye contact (84%).

Shoppers were asked to comment on the first person's attitude towards them. The comments included:

The receptionist was busy opening boxes, away from the reception desk, but she still noticed we were about.

The person's attitude was very good. However, no ID was worn regarding name, employer, function or role. This was not offered by the person either i.e. name

The person was very pleasant and helpful. Within the constraints of her job the officer conducted herself perfectly (Male visiting Yate)

The person was very helpful and friendly

The person was very busy and seemed distracted

The person came across as being very professional. Plus, was also polite, courteous and wanted to help solve my problem.

The person appeared wanting to help me and was friendly

Only a quarter (26%) of mystery shoppers needed to speak to a second person.

3.5 Second person spoken to

Of the shoppers who did speak to more than one person, the main reason was because first person was the receptionist and they were then directed to a relevant Council Officer. Other reasons included the first person not having enough information to answer the enquiry fully, or the need to clarify certain items of information.

Before seeing a second person, 69% of shoppers said the first person did all they could to deal with their query, while approaching a third (31%) did not feel the first person did all they could to deal with their enquiry.

The largest proportion (50%) of shoppers waited one minute before being spoken to by the second person; 8% were seen immediately while the remainder waited two minutes or more. One shopper waited 10 minutes before being spoken to by a second person.

The majority of shoppers who saw a second person, rated them as good (very and fairly good) in terms of: friendliness (100%); helpfulness (100%); courteousness (92%); interest in the visitor (92%); interest in the enquiry (92%); how serious the enquiry was taken (100%); sympathy (83% - 8% poor) and the amount of eye contact given (83%).

Shoppers were asked to comment on the second person's attitude towards them. The comments included:

The second person was the planning department receptionist, who took the details and informed me that an officer would come to talk to me

The person had a sloppy appearance. There was no name badge and an introduction was absent.

The lady who dealt with me appeared, as though she was going through the motions. Obviously, this is something she has done many times before but it made her come across as being blasé, about my enquiry.

She empathised and understood my problem. I was given enough information to meet my needs and also how do deal with the issue. Plus, the possible time periods involved. I was given a housing association list, with the types of accommodation available and an application form for my mother to fill in and how I can be involved. She brought with her all the forms and information therefore, she did not have to leave me alone from start to finish. A good result and one which I could be and I am happy with.

I did not know the name of the person who I wanted to speak to but rang another office for the person.

I asked for the package, regarding noise reporting. I was told he could not give the package, unless I gave the name of the noisy neighbours

3.6 Overall assessment

3.6.1 Telephone numbers

A quarter (24%) of shoppers were given a phone number that was written down for them; a further 60% did not expect to be given a telephone number and 14% expected a telephone number but were not given one.

3.6.2 Leaflets

A third (34%) the shoppers were given leaflets; a further 42% did not expect any and 22% expected a leaflet but were not given one. The leaflets received were:

- The Beacon
- Be with Us application form and letter
- List of Registered Social Landlords and Property List
- Help with rent and council tax for people of working age
- List of performances

The majority (94%) shoppers who received a leaflet said they were fairly or very easy to understand, while only a quarter (24%) said it explained how to get the leaflet in other formats.

3.6.3 Response to enquiry

The majority (88%) of mystery shoppers felt they were given a good response to their enquiry (57% very good); 2% felt the response was neither good nor poor and 10% felt it was poor.

Where shoppers said the response to their enquiry was very good this was often down to the Customer Care Officer being seen as friendly polite and willing to help. Shoppers rating the response as good were also impressed by the level of interest staff showed in them and how seriously their enquiry was taken.

In instances where the response was rated as fairly good or neither good nor poor, this was often because the felt that their enquiry was not taken seriously or because their enquiry was rushed.

3.6.4 Satisfaction with visit

Similarly to the aforementioned results, 88% were satisfied with the outcome of their visit (48% very satisfied); 2% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 10% were very/fairly dissatisfied.

3.6.5 Feeling valued and treated fairly

In total, 84% of shoppers felt valued as a customer; 6% felt 'not very valued' and 2% not at all valued. In terms of being treated fairly, 57% of shoppers agreed strongly that they were treated fairly; 33% agreed they were treated fairly; 4% neither agreed nor disagreed and 6% disagreed they were treated fairly by staff.

3.6.6 Overall service

Overall, 88% of shoppers rated the overall quality of the service they received as good (47% as very good); 2% of shoppers felt the quality of service was neither good nor poor; 2% thought the service was fairly poor and 8% considered the service to be very poor.

4 Findings - Telephone

4.1 Introduction

A total of 76 mystery shops were completed by telephone; 30 by researchers from BMG and 46 by panellists. Telephone mystery shops made by interviewers from BMG were more general in nature, while those completed by members of the Citizen Panel were more specific and often resulted in a follow up action, such as the delivery or collection of an item.

The mystery shops telephone calls were all made to the switchboard; 01254 388111. A total of eight scenario groups were used.

4.2 Contact information

The majority (87%) of shoppers got through on the first attempt, with 13% of shoppers having to make a second attempt.

Of the shoppers that experienced an unsuccessful call in the first instance, the reasons for abandoning the call included waiting for more than 10 rings for the phone to be answered and an engaged tone. A further two calls were abandoned on the second attempt because the call was not answered (this has reduced the base on some questions to 74).

The following table shows the number of contacts made for each of the scenario groups:

Table 7 Contacts by scenario group

Scenario group	Number of contacts
Delivery bags	11
Bulk collections	9
Assisted Collections	7
Deliveries	10
Recycling	14
Appointments	8
Planning	8
Environmental health	9
Total	76

All calls were made on a weekday, with the largest proportion of calls being made on a Tuesday (28%) and Wednesday (22%).

Shoppers were given the option to record the number of rings or number of seconds before the call was answered. Three quarters (78%) of calls were measured in rings only, while 16% were measured in seconds and 5% were measured in both.

Where the shoppers recorded the number of rings before the call was answered, 45% of calls were answered in one ring and 27% in two rings. Overall, 94% of calls were answered in 10 rings or less. However, some mystery shoppers let the phone ring longer than this, with one call being answered after 36 rings.

Where the time taken to answer the call was recorded in seconds, 63% of calls were answered in 20 seconds or less, with one call being answered immediately. However, 37% of calls measured in seconds took longer than 10 seconds to be answered, with some mystery shoppers letting the phone ring for more than two minutes.

4.2.1 Call greeting

The majority (73%) of shoppers reported that when the call was answered the call handler said ‘Hello /Good Morning / Good Afternoon’. One in seven (14%) shoppers said the call handler gave their name and 49% were asked ‘How can I help you?’ The Council was mentioned by the call handler in 82% of instances. The majority (92%) of shoppers said that the call handler sounded ready to take their call.

The following table illustrates how the shopper was greeted when they answered the phone.

Figure 2 Initial contact with call handler (valid responses only)

Greeting	% Yes	% No
The person greeted you with “Hello/good morning/afternoon”	73%	27%
They mentioned the service name	15%	85%
They mentioned Hyndburn Council	82%	18%
They gave their own name	14%	86%
They asked how they could help you (or similar)	49%	51%
They asked for your postcode within the greeting	4%	96%
Base = 74		

Approaching three quarters (72%) of shoppers rated their initial contact with the first person they spoke to as good (28% very good). One in eight (12%) shoppers rated their initial contact as poor and 16% rated the initial contact as neither good nor poor.

Reasons for the contact being rated as poor included:

The person sounded hassled and was quite abrupt

The initial contact did not tell me that she was transferring me and just said 'one moment' Then I found myself in a queue and listening to music

The call handler just offered to pass me onto someone else. I was left on silent hold for five minutes, before being given a direct number

She read the number out far too fast. I had to read it back to her, so she could correct me.

I was interrupted before I finished speaking to the call handler

I think it's probably not the person's fault that they scored only two, as she couldn't help me. However, she cut me off mid sentence and said that she would put me through to the trees & woodland officer. Then the call went straight to voicemail.

I didn't get the chance to finish my enquiry before I was interrupted and told 'wait a moment'. This was after two minutes of ringing before the phone was answered in the first place. I was going to abort the attempt just as she answered. She then transferred me without telling me who to or even that she was going to do

As I was explaining the scenario, she cut in and said 'I will put you through to licensing'. She had a very tense tone and just seemed to want to get rid of me.

Two fifths (40%) of callers had their enquiry dealt with by the first person answering the phone, while 60% had to speak to more than one person.

Before being transferred, 79% of shoppers needing to speak to a second person felt that the first person they spoke to did all they could to deal with their query. While a fifth (21%) of shoppers did not feel the first person did all that they could before transferring the call. The majority (77%) of shoppers were told who they were being transferred to.

The largest proportion (43%) of shoppers were spoken to immediately, while 27% waited 1 minute before they were spoken to by a second person. One mystery shopper waited 15 minutes before being spoken to. Upon answering the call 61% of shoppers said the second person introduced themselves.

When asked how they rated their initial contact with the second person they spoke to, 75% of shoppers rated it as good (36% very good), while 11% rated the contact with the second person as fairly poor. Reasons for rating the second person as poor included:

The respondent didn't give me a name or apologise for putting me on hold for six minutes. When I asked my question, I wasn't told when the collection would be, but just said 'On next recycling day'. I had to prompt for specifics until I was asked for my address.

It took too long to answer the phone. He didn't ask for the application number even though I told him I had it. I was just asked for the address of the applicant. Then it went silent as, I could hear him on a keyboard for a while. He didn't ask me to hold on or tell me what he was doing during the silence.

I was refused information, unless I gave my post code, full name and street name

I was not offered an appointment. Initially, I was asked if I had applied for pension credit and was advised to do that plus I was given the phone number. I was then threatened about my circumstances and my savings and I hadn't expected to be asked these questions. I was told that I can't claim if I have over œ16k in savings. Only, after I answered this was I then told that 'if you like' then a claim form can be sent. I accepted the offer saying I would like to see the form to read through it. I was

uncomfortable with the questions asked when I hadn't expected it as I was making an initial enquiry.

He didn't ask me any questions after he asked for my name and address. I was only offered an appointment when I asked if someone could help with my difficulty in completing forms.

One shopper had to speak to a third person. This person did introduce themselves by providing their first name, and the shopper rated their contact with this person as fairly good.

4.3 Content of the call

4.3.1 Required information

Half (50%) of shoppers, providing a valid response, reported that the call handler fully provided the requisite information listed on the instruction sheet, while 40% felt the requisite information was partially provided. One in ten (10%) shoppers reported that none of the required information was provided.

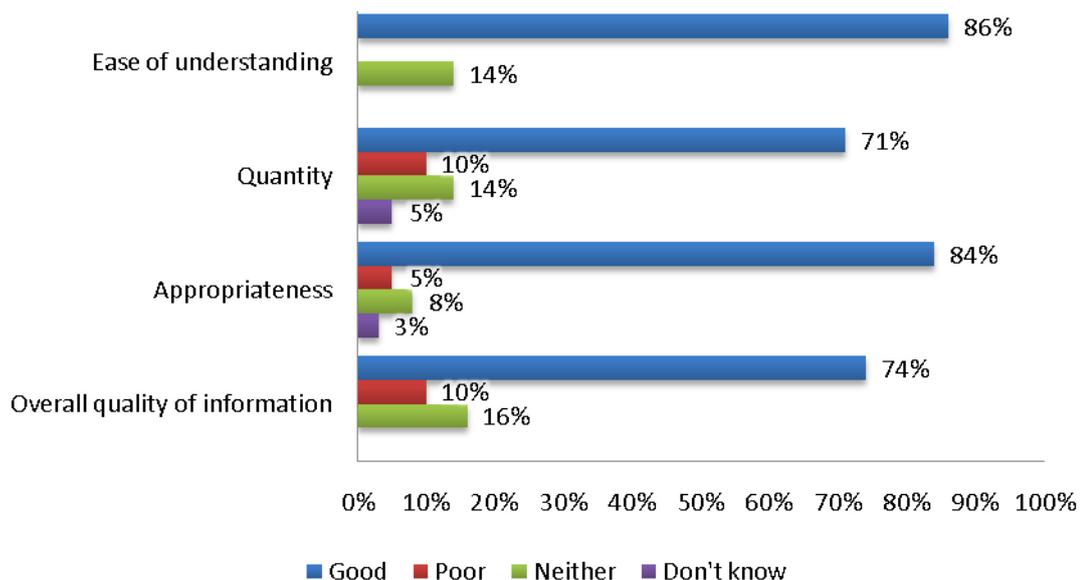
Additional information was offered by the call handler in 32% of instances, while the majority of shoppers (68%) said no additional information was offered.

4.3.2 Length of call

The largest proportion of shoppers (33%) said their conversation lasted two minutes; more than a quarter (27%) of conversations lasted one minute; a fifth (19%) lasted three minutes while 18% lasted four minutes or more. In two instances, the call lasted less than one minute.

4.3.3 Call experience

Figure 3 Verbal information (valid responses only)



Unweighted sample base = 73

Shoppers rated all aspects of the verbal information they were given highly. More than four fifths rated the ease of understanding and appropriateness of the information as good; 86% and 84% respectively. Approaching three quarters rated the overall quality of information provided as good (74%) while 71% of shoppers said the quantity of information was good. However, one in ten shoppers rated the overall quality of information and the quantity of information as poor.

4.3.4 Anything else they could do for you

Almost half (49%) of the shoppers reported that the call handler asked them if there was anything else they could do for them or offered any additional services, however, in the majority of instances this was not the case.

4.3.5 Result of the call

In two fifths of instances (42%) the call to Hyndburn Borough Council resulted in something being sent, collected or delivered to the mystery shopper. More than a third (36%) of shoppers said they had a form, leaflet or information sheet sent to them, while a quarter (26%) received a blue box. Fewer shoppers received a white bag (16%), green bag (12%) or had bulky items collected (12%).

4.3.5.1 Information sheets and leaflets

Of those receiving a form, leaflet or information sheet, all shoppers received this information within four working days, with one shopper receiving the information the following day. Of these, 89% said the information / form was easy to understand and 55% said it explained how to get the information in a different language, large print or Braille.

4.3.5.2 Boxes and bags

Of those requesting a white or green bag all bags were received within three working days, with three shoppers receiving them the following day. Of those requesting blue boxes, all boxes were received within five working days, with 57% being received after three working days.

In 45% of instances, the bag or box was left by the shoppers' front door, while other shoppers received their bag through the post, or their box was left in a prearranged location. Only one shopper said their delivery was left on their path/driveway.

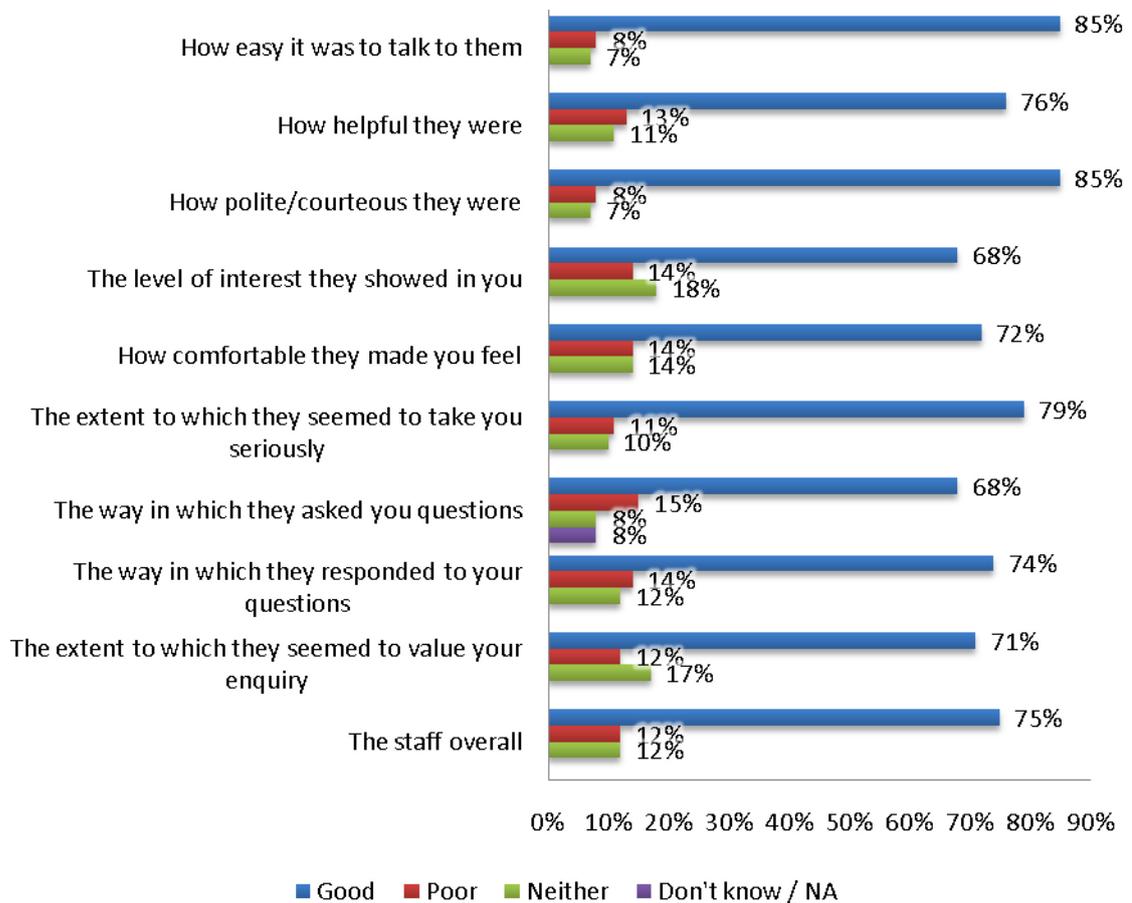
4.3.5.3 Bulky collection

Of the three mystery shoppers receiving a bulky collection, only one shopper reported being offered an open access collection. One shopper was not provided with an option and the remaining shopper failed to provide an answer to this question.

All three shoppers said the call handler clearly asked for clarification of where the items were located; while only in two instances did the call handler clarify what items were to be collected. All shoppers were told the timescales involved in their items being located.

In terms of time waited for collection, one shopper had their items collected the following day, while one shopper waited two days and the remaining shopper waited five working days.

Figure 4 Aspects of the call (valid responses only)



Unweighted sample base = 72

As the chart shows, the majority of shoppers rated how easy it was to talk to staff and how polite/courteous they were as good (85%), while 79% of shoppers rated staff positively in terms of how seriously they seemed to take them.

Three quarters (76%) of shoppers rated staff as good in terms of how helpful they were, while a further 75% rated the staff overall as good.

Table 8 Call handler (valid responses only)

Greeting	% Throughout	% Occasionally / once	% Not at all
Call handler appeared unsure about the information they were providing/not confident about answering your enquiry	3%	10%	88%
Call handler appeared distracted by a colleague or something else	1%	4%	94%
Call handler used over familiar expressions e.g. mate/love/duck	-	-	100%
Call handler interrupted or spoke over the shopper unnecessarily	-	6%	94%
Call handler left the shopper unsure as to what would happen next	-	12%	88%
Call handler appeared rude or abusive	-	3%	97%
Call handler unnecessarily directed the shopper to a third party	-	-	100%
Call handler did not listen carefully	1%	8%	90%
Base = varies			

Shoppers reported that occasionally the call handlers appeared unsure about the information they were providing (10% occasionally, 3% throughout) or left the shopper unsure as what would happen next (12% occasionally). Shoppers also reported the call handler not listening carefully (8% occasionally and 1% throughout) and appearing to be distracted by a colleague or something else (4% occasionally and 1% throughout).

4.3.6 Ending the call

The majority (85%) of shoppers said that the call handler said goodbye at the end of the call and approaching two thirds (63%) said 'thank you'. More than a quarter (28%) of the call handlers summarised the call and actions to be taken; 51% asked if there was anything else they could do to help and 21% checked that they had answered the query satisfactorily. Worryingly, 4% of staff ended the call without any sign off at all.

On a scale of 1-5 where 1 was slow and laborious and 5 was quick and efficient, 57% of shoppers rated the way in which the staff member handled the end of the call as 5; 21% as 4; 12% as 3, 7% as 2 and 3% as 1.

On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is rude and disinterested and 5 is polite and courteous 81% of shoppers rated the way in which the staff member handled the end of the call as 5; 21% as 4; 11% as 3; 6% as 2 and 3% as 1.

On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is mechanical as though reading from a script and 5 is warm and personable 51% of shoppers rated the way in which the staff member handled the end of the call as 5; 19% as 4; 14% as 3; 12% as 2 and 3% as 1.

The majority of shoppers (73%) said they did develop a rapport with the call handler, while 27% did not feel this to be the case. More than two thirds of shoppers (77%) said the call handler had access to the relevant records and 40% thought the call handler went the extra mile.

In terms of using the computer systems 39% of shoppers described the call handler's competence in using the computer system as good; 12% as satisfactory; 6% as poor while 43% said that no computer system appeared to be used.

4.3.7 Overall experience of the call

Three quarters (74%) of shoppers rated their overall quality of the call as good (43% very good). However, 12% of shoppers rated their overall call experience as poor, and reasons for this included:

4.3.7.1 Negative comments

The initial contact was not good. The call handler was quite abrupt. I had to wait five minutes for the call to be picked up at customer service. The second call handler was quick, efficient, friendly and polite. It was a pleasure having a conversation with this person.

The first point of contact interrupted me before I had finished speaking. The second call handler seemed bored and not enthusiastic at all.

The CSA paused too long after my request and made me feel uncomfortable. The person did not offer me their name. I was only offered an appointment when I prompted the call handler. I was not told where to get more information e.g. P2A or a claim form. There was no explanation or listing of documents when I suggested I struggled with forms.

The call didn't last very long, as the lady didn't ask the relevant questions like 'how can I help you?' Also, I feel she didn't end the call correctly, as I was not asked i.e. 'Is there anything else?' However, she did answer the questions that I had put to her.

Please see the earlier comments. I was not offered an appointment. I was asked questions rather brusquely regarding my personal circumstances. I felt as if I was being diverted (fobbed off) to pension credit with no consideration that I might possibly find it difficult to make these enquiries.

It initially took too long to answer the call. My enquiry was not listened to and the call handler said 'wait a moment', without telling me what I was waiting for. I was left for

one minute waiting for my second contact to answer. Again, my enquiry was met with no enthusiasm and again I was left holding without knowing why.

She could have been more friendly. She didn't seem ready to answer questions and was a little nervous

On the whole I would probably think twice about wasting my time and money by calling again.

4.3.7.2 Positive comments

However, some shoppers did have very positive experiences and rated their contact with the council very highly. Positive comments included:

I would have no worries about ringing them on any other issue.

I was answered promptly and was immediately offered a form for a request assisted collection. I was pleased that there was no 'haggling' over who might do it for me. I don't like to rely on neighbours anymore than is really necessary. I live alone.

I received knowledgeable answers to the questions that I asked. There was no hesitation or uncertainty.

I found the person who I spoke to knew what she was talking about. There was no doubt in my mind that she was confident and that the box would be delivered.

It was quick and efficient.

My query was handled very well and the information that I was given was very clear. I feel the second contact did all she could to help me and developed a rapport with me. She tried to put me through to the noise officer but he was unavailable. At the end of the call she told me to call back at around 2pm on 380621 and I needed to speak to Paul Thawaitis, the noise officer.

Both staff members handled my call quickly, efficiently, politely and gave me the full information.

The box was delivered the next day. I would call this excellent!

5 Findings - E-mail

5.1 Introduction

In addition to the telephone and face to face mystery shops, 52 further mystery shops were undertaken via e-mail. All e-mail enquiries were undertaken by the research team at BMG.

Table 9 Point of contact

Contact point	No of e-mails
enquiries@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	30
env_health@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	11
Planning@hyndburnbc.gov.uk	11
Total	52

5.2 Council website

Shoppers completing the e-mail mystery shops were asked to initially look up the relevant page on the Hyndburn Borough Council website (www.hyndburnbc.gov.uk) to assess how easy or difficult it was to find the answer to their enquiry on the website.

Of those shoppers completing this section two thirds (43%) said it was very easy to find the relevant page; 35% found it fairly easy; 4% said it was neither easy nor difficult and 18% found it fairly difficult to find the relevant page on the website.

Shoppers were then asked how easy or difficult it was to find the answer to their query on the relevant web page. Almost half (49%) of shoppers said they found it easy to find the answer to their enquiry via the website (16% very easy); 37% found it difficult to some degree and 14% said it was neither easy nor difficult to find the answer to their enquiry on the website. Shoppers who found it difficult to find the answer to their enquiry on the website were completing scenarios related to Waste, Planning, Council Tax and Environment.

While overall, the largest proportion of shoppers found the website easy to navigate, comprehensive and clear, a number of shoppers found it difficult to find specific answers to their questions, and often had to wade through a number of pages or large amounts of information to find what they were looking for. Comments were also made about the labelling of information.

It was not clear to find which section to look at. It would have been better to label sections i.e. 'green bin' rather than letting me figure out it was under recycling, as this was not clear. It could possibly be labelled 'household recycling' like 'household waste' is labelled. It was annoying to have to drill down twice to get to the related

I found a web page stating that the Ordnance Survey location plans could be purchased from the Planning department. However, I had to read through the page, as this was not immediately obvious.

It was not clear to find which section to look at. It would have been better to label sections i.e. 'green bin' rather than letting me figure out it was under recycling, as this was not clear. It could possibly be labelled 'household recycling' like 'household waste' is labelled. It was annoying to have to drill down twice to get to the related information. I kept getting directed to various other pages, before I actually got to the information I was looking for. Overall, I found I had to trawl the page making me think I'd missed something and it was easy to miss the information.

I had to search for the guidance. It was not listed under environmental health but under licence, alcohol and entertainment

I found the information I needed after looking through a few pages on the website

5.3 Wait times

5.3.1 Notification of receipt

Only two shoppers received a notification of receipt of their enquiry, with both of these being received via e-mail. One of these notifications was received within two hours and the other within two days. Only one of the notifications said who would be dealing with the enquiry, but did not provide the contact details for this person.

5.3.2 Response to enquiry

Overall, 23% of shoppers received a response to their enquiry within minutes; 58% within hours and 19% within days.

Table 10 Time taken to respond

Time taken	E-mail
Minutes	23%
Hours	58%
Days	19%
Quickest response time	11 minutes
Longest response time	14 days

All responses were received via e-mail.

5.3.3 Interaction and advice received

In the majority of instances (92%) shoppers reported that the staff member who responded to their e-mail enquiry used positive language.

Table 11 Response to enquiry

Response	E-mail
Used positive language	92%
Did not use positive	8%

Overall, 79% of shoppers rated the way staff responded to their enquiry as good, with 50% rating it as very good. One in seven shoppers (15%) rated the way in which staff responded as neither good nor poor and 6% rated staff response to their enquiry as fairly poor.

Table 12 Rating of staff response

Rating of staff	E-mail
Good	79%
Poor	6%
Neither	15%

When asked why they had given this particular rating shoppers provided the following comments:

I received a very quick response. The respondent had a friendly and approachable tone plus clearly answered the question.

I was told that I had contacted the wrong department. However, I was not advised of the correct contact details for where to express my queries to. The tone was rude and abrupt. It would have been easy to forward an email to me and copy me in.

I was informed I could purchase the maps plus their cost, but I was not told where I had to go to purchase them

It was a very quick and full response, which was less than twenty minutes. However, the email appeared to be a cut and paste of a standard response

It was a very quick and thorough response, which explained where to look on the website and what to do next.

I received a very quick and thorough response. I was told everything I needed and more

All of the information was provided but the response took eight days to arrive

The response was very quick, but not very friendly. It was quite abrupt with no opportunity to follow up etc.

A very quick, friendly and thorough response

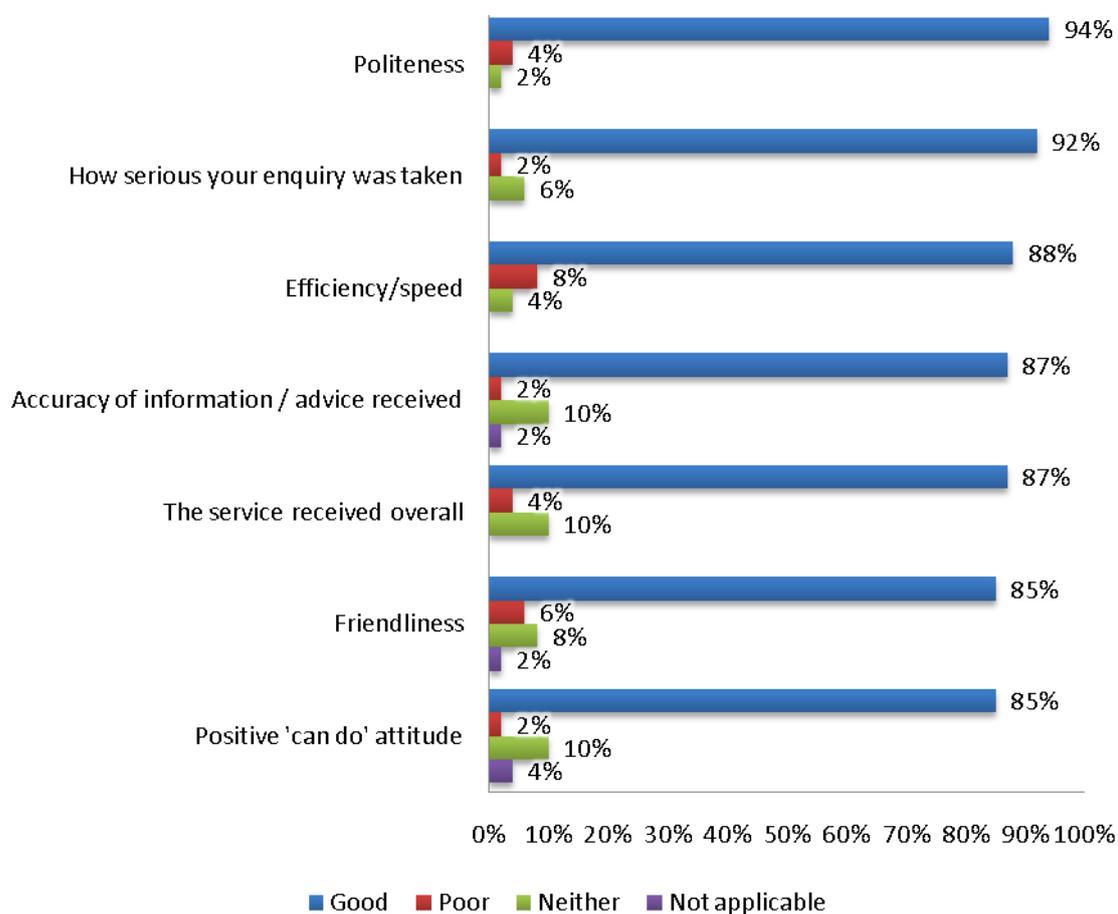
5.3.4 Leaflets

Only one shopper received a leaflet as part of the response to their enquiry, which they thought was fairly easy to understand. However, the form did not explain how to get it in different formats.

5.4 Overall service received

The way in which staff responded to the enquiry was rated most highly for politeness with 94% of shoppers rating this aspect as good. Staff were also rated highly for how seriously the enquiry was taken (92%) and their efficiency and speed (88%). Overall, all aspects of the contact was rated by more than four fifths of shoppers as good.

Figure 5 Staff response to enquiry



Unweighted sample base = 52

The majority of shoppers (90%) said that staff took ownership of the enquiry, while one in ten (10%) thought this was not the case. Three quarters of shoppers (76%) did not feel that staff went the extra mile for them.

When asked what was good or bad about the service they received shoppers' comments included:

Positive:

The basic query was clearly answered with additional help provided in terms of noting the website address as a source of information. Overall I was impressed by the speed and quality of the response.

I was offered free bungee straps for the bins. Plus, I was given extra information that I did not expect

It was very good and to the point. I was called the 'enquirer' even though I had sent an email with my name. I would have preferred the respondent to have used my name to make the call more personal.

Very good service

I was very impressed with the level of service that I received

Negative:

I had to wait two weeks for a response, which I found to be very poor.

It's a shame that the response took so long

I think the person could have been more friendly!

It's a shame it seven days for them to respond

My enquiry was passed on to the County Council. However, the email from Hyndburn was very sloppy and written entirely in lower case. The response from the County Council was much better.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Overview

The following section concludes the findings from the mystery shopping exercise and makes recommendations for the development of the Customer Service Standards.

6.2 Conclusion

Overall, the mystery shopping exercise revealed that on the whole customers contacting Hyndburn Borough Council, either in person at one of the Council office's, via the telephone or e-mail have a good customer service experience. When asked to rate their overall experience 87% of those contacting the council by e-mail rated their experience as good, along with 88% of shoppers visiting a council office and 74% of shoppers contacting the council by telephone.

6.2.1 Positive results

The mystery shopping exercise identified a number of areas in which the Council is performing very well.

6.2.1.1 Positive results (Visits)

The majority of shoppers found the offices easy to locate (90%), and rated aspects of the office such as cleanliness (98%), appearance of staff (94%) and the overall appearance of the office (84%) as good.

Almost three quarters of shoppers waited two minutes or less before being seen by the person behind the counter, with 44% of shoppers being seen immediately.

Approaching nine in ten shoppers rated the response to their enquiry as good, reporting that staff were friendly (88%), polite and courteous (96%) and helpful (90%).

6.2.1.2 Positive results (Telephone)

The mystery shoppers rated call handlers very positively in terms of how easy they were to talk to (85%) and how polite and courteous they were (85%). Staff were also rated highly (79%) for how seriously they took the customer and how helpful they were (76%).

The majority (73%) of shoppers said they developed a rapport with the call handler and 77% said staff had access to the relevant records.

6.2.1.3 Positive results (E-mail)

Responses were made to the majority of e-mail responses very quickly and sometimes in a matter of minutes. The e-mails were generally very thorough in their response and written in a polite, friendly and professional manner. Often the e-mails provided more information than was actually requested, and it was obvious the staff member was taking the enquiry seriously and had taken ownership of it.

6.2.2 Areas for improvement (Face to face)

6.2.2.1 Inside the office

Although in the majority of instances there was someone in each office ready to deal with the mystery shopper's enquiry, in one in ten cases the mystery shopper had to wait for a member of staff to deal with their enquiry.

6.2.2.2 Aspects of the office

A number of aspects of the office environment were identified as needing improvement with 26% of shoppers reporting the visibility of emergency contact details as poor, 16% rating the friendliness of the office as poor and 14% rating the visibility of opening times as poor. Efforts should be made to ensure all information such as opening times are clearly visible and available to customers.

6.2.2.3 Length of wait

Some shoppers felt they had to wait an inappropriate amount of time before being spoken to, with 26% of shoppers waiting more than three minutes before speaking to a member of staff, with one mystery shopper visiting the Town Hall waiting for 40 minutes before being spoken to.

6.2.2.4 Dealing with the enquiry

A third of shoppers did not feel that the first person they spoke to regarding their enquiry did all they could before passing them onto a second person. This gave the impression to shoppers that staff were not willing to assist them and wanted to pass them off to someone else as quickly as possible. One in ten shoppers rated the response to their enquiry as poor, most often due to the level of interest staff showed in them and subsequently how seriously they thought their enquiry was taken.

6.2.2.5 Leaflets in other formats

Only 24% of shoppers visiting an office said that the leaflets they received explained how to get the information in a different language or format. However, 55% of shoppers receiving information via the post said the information they received explained how to access the information in a different format.

6.2.2.6 Treated fairly and feeling valued

One in ten shoppers were dissatisfied with their visit, which may be partly due to 2% of shoppers reporting that they did not feel valued as a customer and 6% of shoppers disagreeing that they were treated fairly by staff.

6.2.3 Areas for improvement (Telephone)

The mystery shopping exercise also revealed some areas for improvement, which the Council may wish to address or they may result in the failure to meet all Customer Service Standards in the future.

6.2.3.1 Length of time to answer a call

Some mystery shoppers reported that their call took an unacceptable amount of time to be answered, with 37% of calls taking longer than 10 seconds to answer and with some calls taking more than two minutes to be answered. Some calls were abandoned or attempted a second time because of the length of time take for the call to be answered.

6.2.3.2 Answering the call

When a call is answered there appears to be little consistency in the greeting that the call handler uses to begin the call. For example, 73% of call handlers said Hello/Good morning/Good afternoon, 49% asked 'How can I help you?' while only 14% gave their name. In the majority of instances (82%) mentioned Hyndburn Borough Council.

6.2.3.3 Information provided

Only half of the mystery shoppers reported that the call handler provided all of the information provided on their briefing sheet, with a further 40% reporting that the information was partly provided. One in ten mystery shoppers stated that none of the expected information was provided, suggesting that in some instances call handlers do not have all the information they require at their disposal or have gaps in their knowledge of service areas.

6.2.3.4 Knowledge of call handler

As well as not providing the information expected, in some instances shoppers reported that the call handler appeared unsure about the information they were providing occasionally (10%) or throughout the entire call (3%). In a number of instances the shopper was left unsure as to the next steps (12%). Again, this indicates some call handlers not having all of the information or knowledge they require to fully answer customers' enquiries.

6.2.3.5 Ending the call

As with the call greeting the mystery shopping exercise indicates that there is not a standard on how to close a call from a customer. While the majority of call handlers said goodbye (85%), 'thank you' (63%) or asked if there was anything else they could help the caller with (51%), there were still high proportions of call handlers who did not do this, and in 4% of instances staff ended the call without any sign off at all.

6.2.4 Areas for improvement (E-mail)

6.2.4.1 Length of time

While the response time to e-mails in the majority of cases was very good, almost a fifth of e-mail response took days to arrive rather than minutes or hours, with one response taking 14 days to arrive. E-mails sent to the enquiries@hyndburnbc.gov.uk address were responded to in a much timelier manor than e-mails sent to the planning or environmental health e-mail addresses.

6.2.4.2 Consistency of response

While the responses received from the enquiries@hyndburnbc.gov.uk address were in the majority of instances consistent and thorough, e-mails received from individuals from the planning, environmental health, or other departments that enquiries were forwarded to, were much less consistent and in some cases quite unprofessional. E-mails were received without any opening introduction, or for example, were typed all in lower case, and written in a very informal manner.

6.3 Customer Service Standards

The Council may wish to consider the following areas when developing its Customer Service Standards.

6.3.1 Length of time to wait

It is recommended that the Customer Service Standards include a maximum amount of time customers can expect to wait to be seen in any of the Council offices. This will help reduce the number of instances where customers are kept waiting for three minutes or more before being spoken to.

6.3.2 Length of time to answer call

The Customer Service Standards should outline an acceptable number of rings or number of seconds a call should be answered in. For example 'we will endeavour to answer all calls within 6 rings or 10 seconds. If this standard had been measured as part of this mystery shopping exercise, 94% of calls measured in rings would have met this standard, compared to 63% of calls measured in seconds.

6.3.3 Answering and ending the call

It is a recommendation that a standard call greeting and ending is implemented and set out in the Customer Service Standards so that all customers know what to expect and to ensure consistency each time a customer contacts the Council. For example, at the beginning of the call all staff will say "Good morning / afternoon, followed by their name, Hyndburn Borough Council and then ask 'How can I help you'. A standard call close statement could also be introduced. This standard can then be easily measured in future mystery shopping exercises.

6.3.4 Valuing customers and treating everyone fairly

All customers having any form of contact with the council should feel valued as a customer and resident of Hyndburn Borough Council and should feel that they are being treated fairly by staff in all instances.

6.3.5 Providing information in different languages and formats

All information produced by the council should be made available in different formats and languages and customers should be clearly made aware of how to access these different formats. Only 26% of mystery shoppers receiving a leaflet or information sheet said that it explained how to receive the information in a different format.

Because people matter, we listen.

With some 20 years' experience, BMG Research has established a strong reputation for delivering high quality research and consultancy.

Our business is about understanding people; because they matter. Finding out what they really need; from the type of information they use to the type of services they require. In short, finding out about the kind of world people want to live in tomorrow.

BMG serves both the social public sector and the commercial private sector, providing market and customer insight which is vital in the development of plans, the support of campaigns and the evaluation of performance.

Innovation and development is very much at the heart of our business, and considerable attention is paid to the utilisation of technologies such as portals and information systems to ensure that market and customer intelligence is widely shared.

