

5 Decision Notices

5.1 Introduction and summary

Legislation requires Local Authorities (LAs) to provide customers with full and detailed information explaining their decision notices. There is a view that the amount of detail needed can provoke misunderstandings and increase workloads of Benefits departments. This section of questions aimed to get a clearer understanding of how the Decision Notice requirements affect the workloads for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) departments within LAs.

The majority (97 per cent) of LAs said they had to deal with queries about Decision Notices from landlords: 44 per cent described the quantity of queries as a lot and 53 per cent described the quantity as a few.

The most frequently mentioned changes that LAs said they would make to Decision Notices in order to make them simpler to understand were to simplify what is issued to customers (90 per cent) and shorten the notices (82 per cent).

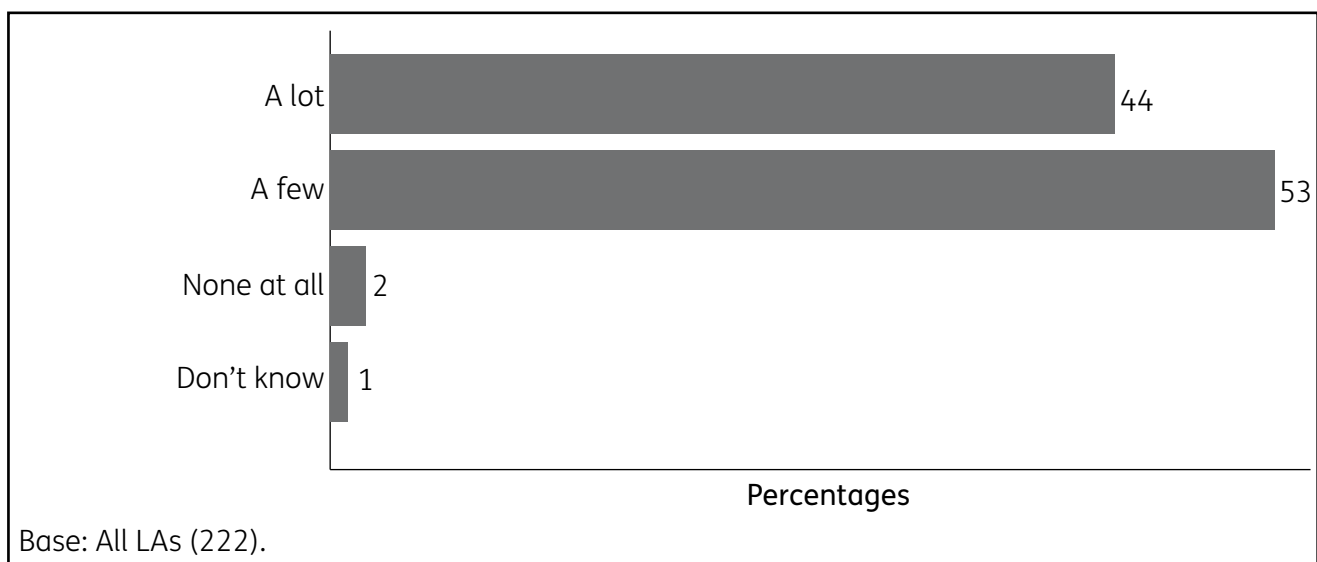
When asked if it would be helpful to combine Decision Notices for HB and CTB where possible, three in five LAs (60 per cent) said yes it would be helpful whilst 37 per cent said they were already actively doing this where possible.

The majority of LAs (85 per cent) said that they had to take action to overcome customers' problems of not understanding Decision Notices. When asked what workarounds they used to help customers understand their Decision Notices, approximately two-thirds (65 per cent) said they sent out a visiting officer if required.

5.2 Main findings

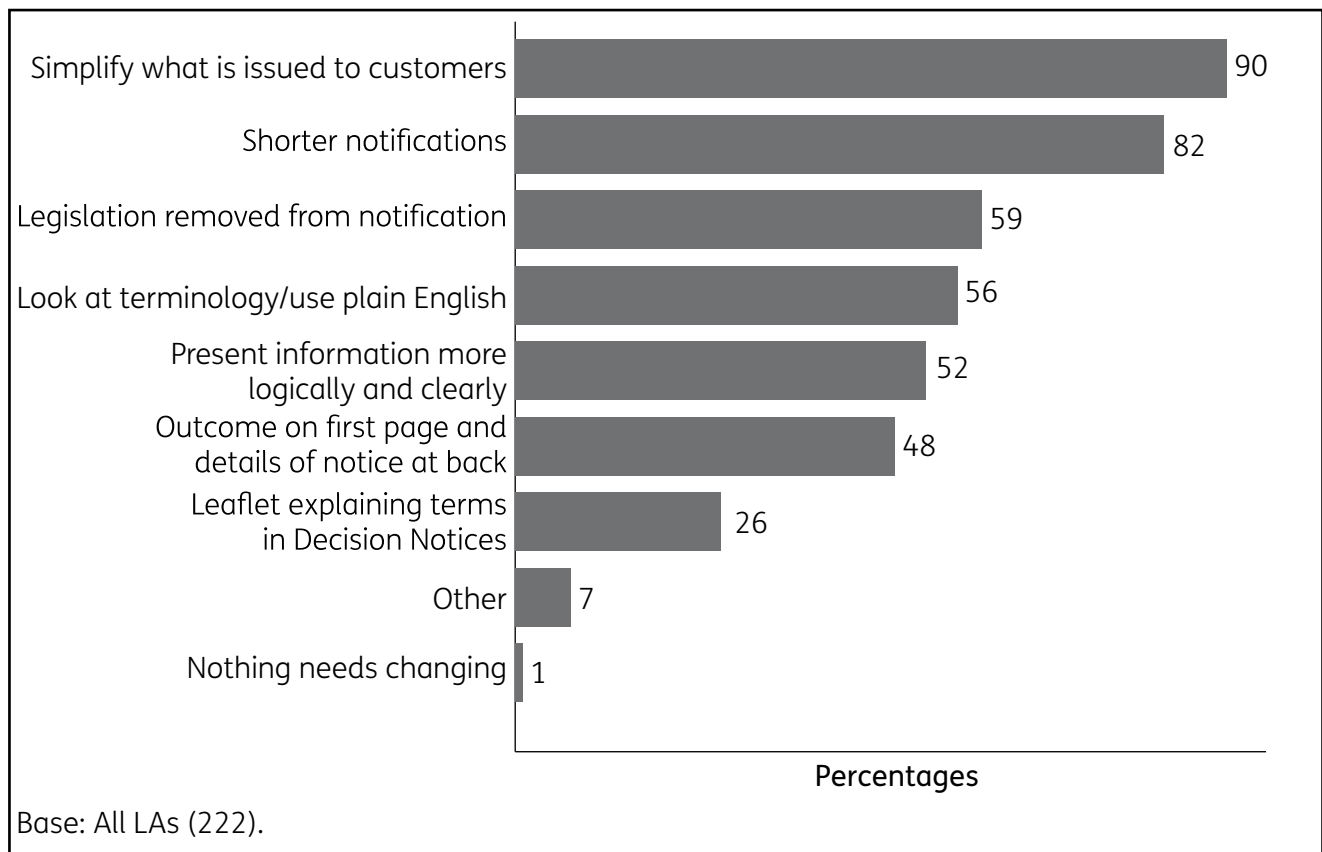
The following details the main findings and includes charts for all questions plus commentary highlighting the key sub-group differences.

Figure 5.1 Would you say that your LA receives a lot, a few or no queries at all from landlords as a result of the information on Decision Notices that current legislation requires local authorities to provide?



The majority (97 per cent) of LAs said they had to deal with queries about Decision Notices from landlords: 44 per cent described the quantity of queries as a lot and 53 per cent described the quantity as a few.

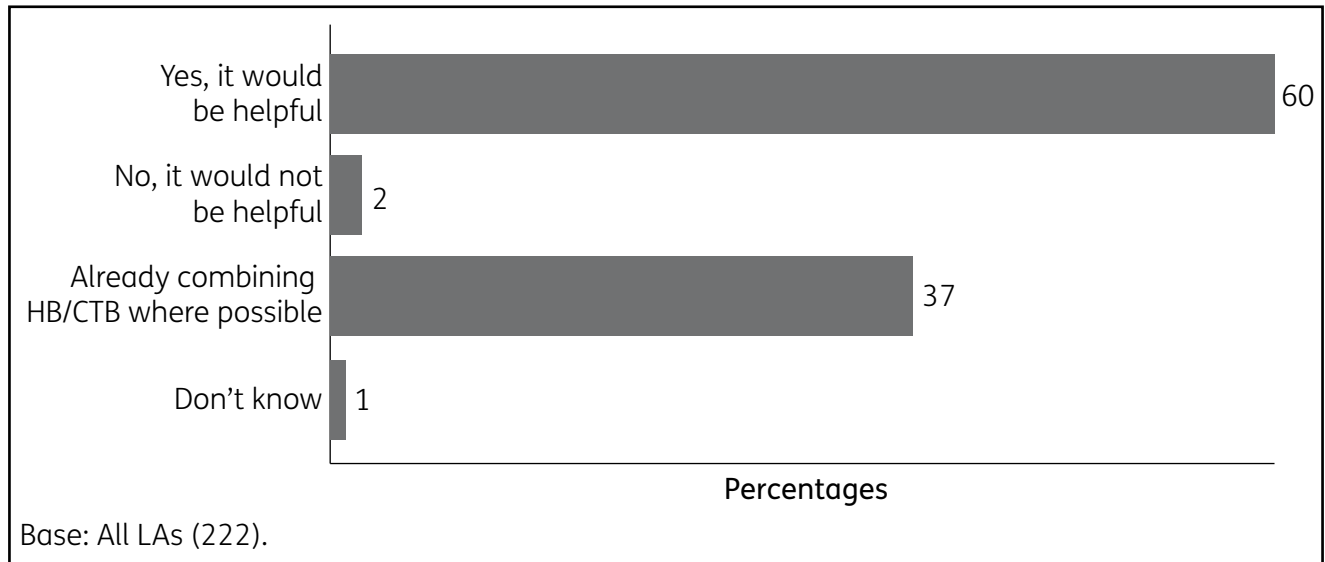
Figure 5.2 What changes, if any, do you think would make the Decision Notices simpler to understand?



The most frequently mentioned changes that LAs said they would make to Decision Notices in order to make them simpler to understand were to simplify what is issued to customers (90 per cent) and shorten the notices (82 per cent). LAs with high caseloads were significantly more likely to have said that shorter notifications would make Decision Notices simpler to understand (87 per cent of LAs with high caseloads compared to 76 per cent of LAs with low caseloads).

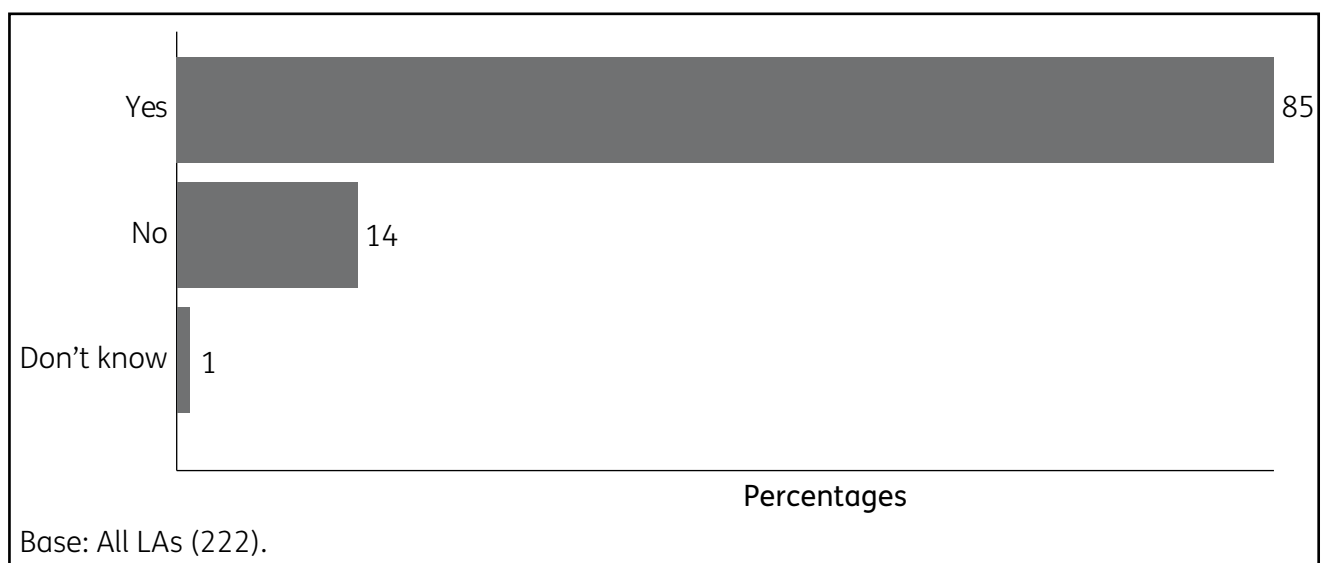
Approximately three in five (59 per cent) said that they thought that legislation should be removed from the Decision Notices but this idea was significantly less well supported amongst Welsh authorities, of which only 27 per cent said this should be done.

Figure 5.3 At the moment the legislation requires your LA to issue a separate Decision Notice for HB and CTB which means that there is a degree of duplication. Do you think it would be helpful to combine the decision notices for HB and CTB where possible?



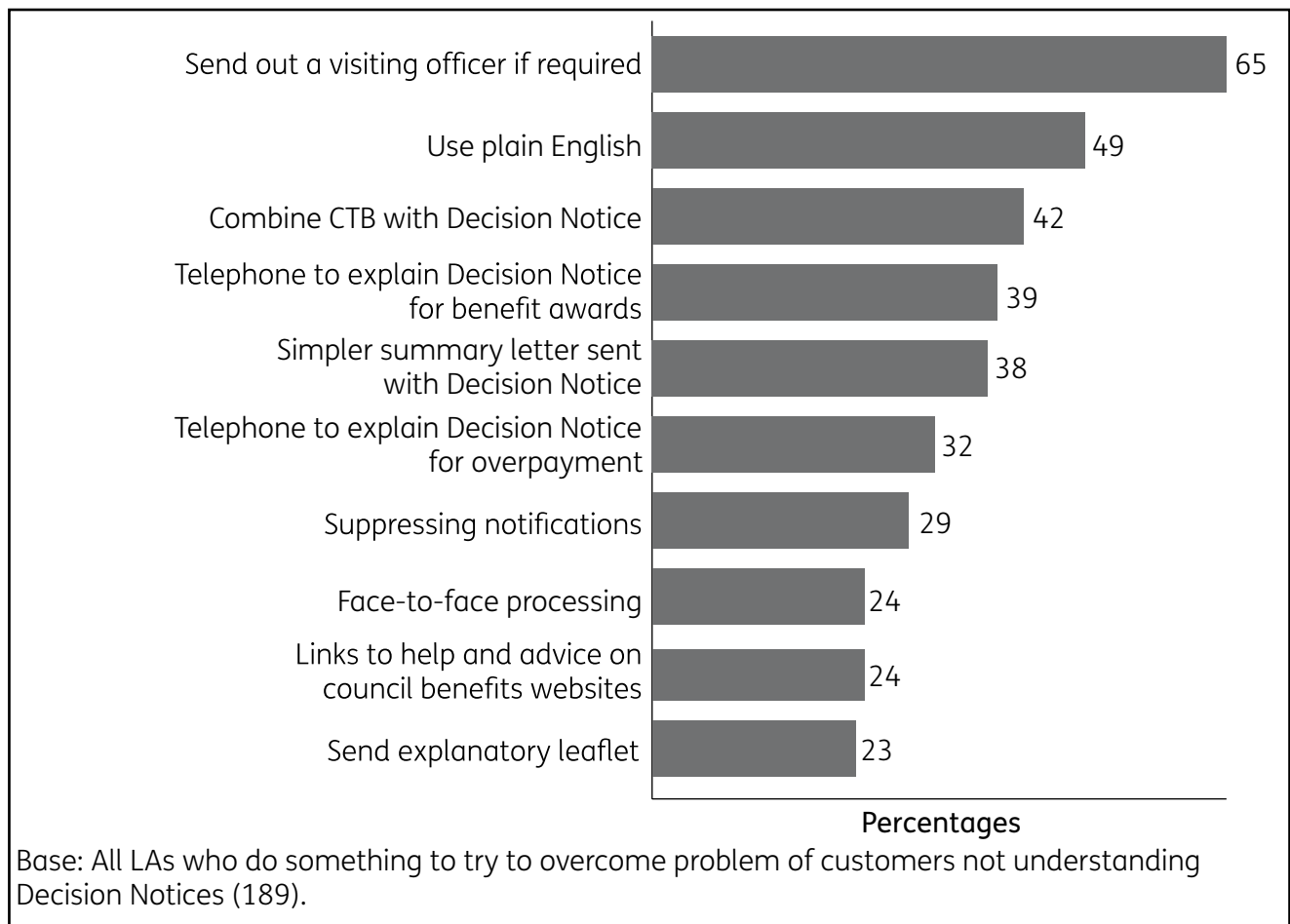
When asked if it would be helpful to combine Decision Notices for HB and CTB where possible, three in five LAs (60 per cent) said yes it would be helpful whilst 37 per cent said they were already actively doing this where possible. LAs with high caseloads were significantly more likely to have said it would be helpful than were LAs with medium caseloads (69 per cent and 51 per cent respectively). However, LAs with medium caseloads were significantly more likely to have said that they were already combining HB/CTB Decision Notices where possible (48 per cent) than were LAs with high caseloads (29 per cent). Just two per cent said it would not be helpful to combine the Decision Notices for HB and CTB.

Figure 5.4 Does your LA do anything to try to overcome the problem of customers not understanding Decision Notices?



The majority of LAs (85 per cent) said that they had to take action to overcome customer's problems of not understanding Decision Notices. English Metropolitan LAs (96 per cent) and English Districts (87 per cent) were significantly more likely to have said that they took this kind of action than were, for example, London Boroughs (70 per cent).

Figure 5.5 What workarounds does your LA use to overcome the problem of customers not understanding Decision Notices? (Main answers)



When asked what workarounds they used to help customers understand their Decision Notices, approximately two-thirds (65 per cent) said they sent out a visiting officer if required. This was recorded at a significantly higher level amongst Welsh authorities of which 89 per cent said they would send a member of staff out and this contrasts to the corresponding figure given by London Boroughs, of which just 36 per cent said they send out a visiting officer. Approximately half (49 per cent) said that they used plain English and this figure rose to 75 per cent of English Metropolitan authorities, in contrast to a lower figure of 39 per cent of English Unitary authorities and 43 per cent of English Districts. 42 per cent combine the CTB bill with the Decision Notice but this is significantly less likely to be the case in Scottish authorities (seven per cent) or London Boroughs (14 per cent).

In addition to the workarounds detailed in the preceding chart, the following were also mentioned:

- Emailing customer to advise a decision has been made to explain the Decision Notice eight per cent.
- Contracting out the formatting, printing, despatch of Decision Notices seven per cent.
- Manually prepared notifications/customised notifications/replace system produced letters with individual notices four per cent.

- Send revised rent account with Decision Notice four per cent
- Send out format letter with link where customer can log in to secure website to view full Decision Notice three per cent
- Phone system with diversion to advice, pre-recorded advice lines three per cent
- Currently under review/currently trying to simplify one per cent
- Online notification one per cent
- Telephone explanations one per cent
- Other two per cent