



Valuation Office
Agency

Ipsos MORI

Understanding customers' experience of dealing with the VOA

Headline findings from Customer Tracking Survey 2013/14

July 2014

This research report has been written by Ipsos MORI based on research carried out in June 2013 to April 2014. The views and findings are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Valuation Office Agency.

Headline Findings



Background to the survey

- This note summarises the findings of a study conducted among: (i) business property owners/lessees who appealed their Rateable Value (RV) for a commercial property; and (ii) domestic respondents who appealed their Council Tax (CT) banding for a property.
- The key aim of the research was to obtain feedback on customers' experience of dealing with the VOA during the Non-Domestic Rating (NDR) and CT appeals processes. The study was designed to obtain robust and reliable findings that can be tracked over time and used by the VOA to improve its service.
- This note covers the aggregate findings from the four quarterly 2013/14 telephone surveys among CT and NDR unrepresented customers (ie customers who managed the appeal themselves rather than via an agent or representative) in the second year of the main stage programme of customer research; 2,021 interviews were conducted with unrepresented NDR customers and 1,258 with unrepresented CT customers.
- This note also summarises findings from the four quarterly 2013/14 telephone surveys among represented CT customers, as well as two biannual 2013/14 surveys among NDR represented customers (ie customers whose appeal was managed via an agent or representative). In this first year of the main stage programme of customer research for these groups, 806 interviews were conducted with represented NDR customers and 541 with represented CT customers.
- The surveys were conducted by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) with, on average, each interview with unrepresented customers lasting 14-18 minutes and each interview with represented customers lasting 11-15 minutes. A random probability sampling method was used whereby each lead was exhausted before an outcome recorded.
- The fieldwork for the 2013/14 surveys was conducted between June 2013 and April 2014.
- The unrepresented data was weighted each quarter to reflect the customer profile and caseload of the Agency for that period in terms of the VOA regional unit, as well as by successful/unsuccessful outcome (and in the CT data by appeal type – informal challenge or formal appeal). An annual weight was also applied to the aggregated data.
- The CT represented data is weighted by successful/unsuccessful outcome and by appeal type. The NDR represented data is weighted by successful/unsuccessful outcome and by regional unit¹.

Summary of findings

- Initial awareness of how properties are valued was fairly low among unrepresented NDR customers (21% saying they knew a great deal or a fair amount), although this had increased by the end of the appeal (by which point 52% felt they knew a great deal or a fair amount). Unrepresented CT customers by comparison expressed slightly higher levels of awareness at the start of the appeal (25% saying they knew a great deal or a fair amount), while awareness at the end of the process (54%) was similar to unrepresented NDR customers. Represented customers (both NDR and CT) expressed much lower levels of awareness and understanding of the appeals process.
- Nearly all unrepresented NDR (91%) and CT (96%) customers had direct contact with the VOA during their appeal; of these, 42% and 46% respectively had contact at least once a month. Represented customers were much less likely to have direct contact with the VOA (39% for NDR, 18% for CT).
- Half of unrepresented NDR customers (50%) had an inspection of their property. The proportion of unrepresented CT customers who received a property inspection was much lower (21%) than for NDR.
- Among unrepresented NDR customers, the majority of appeals lasted up to six months (53%), although 19% took longer than a year. CT appeals were typically shorter: just one per cent took longer than a year, with the majority (54%) completed within two months
- Most unrepresented NDR customers (61%) and unrepresented CT customers (57%) first got in contact with the

¹ The NDR Represented data includes 250 interviews conducted with individuals which were 'routed' from the unrepresented sample to the represented script. These are not subject to weighting due to the lack of reliable profile information.

VOA by telephone. During the appeal, unrepresented NDR customers said that they made contact by telephone (80%), letter (75%) and email (51%). Among unrepresented CT customers, most contact was by letter (86%) or telephone (65%).

- Websites were used by around two in three unrepresented NDR customers (64%) to get information at some point during the process, predominantly the VOA website (55%). Unrepresented CT customers were more likely to use a website (70%), although the proportion using the VOA website specifically was similar (53%). Represented customers were much less likely to look at websites for this purpose (25% for NDR and 22% for CT customers).
- Among unrepresented NDR customers who were aware of an outcome, 42% said the RV was decreased (among represented NDR customers this figure was 44%). The figures for CT customers were lower (33% of unrepresented customers who were aware of an outcome said their banding was decreased; the figure was 26% for represented customers).
- Overall, 46% of unrepresented NDR customers rated the service they received from the VOA as good, while 38% said it was poor. The views of unrepresented CT customers were more positive: 55% rated the service as good, 30% as poor.
- In both unrepresented groups, around half of respondents agreed that they trusted the VOA to get the outcome right, and that their case was dealt with fairly.
- Perceptions about staff were mainly positive. Unrepresented NDR customers were more positive than unrepresented CT customers in relation to staff being polite and friendly (87% compared with 76%), professional (82% compared with 74%), and having the required knowledge and expertise (67% compared with 61%). However, unrepresented CT customers were more positive in relation to staff responding within an appropriate timeframe (74% compared with 61%).

Unrepresented NDR customers

- Most unrepresented NDR customers were male (69%) and of working age (with 66% aged 40-64 and only 11% aged 65 or over).
- The businesses making unrepresented appeals for NDR were generally small (73% had fewer than 10 staff), and were most likely to be a shop or restaurant/cafe/pub.
- One in five unrepresented NDR customers (20%) said they had made previous appeals to the VOA during the previous two years.
- Initial awareness of the VOA appeals process and how properties are valued was fairly low among unrepresented NDR customers (around one in five knew a great deal or a fair amount). The survey also asked about knowledge of how properties are valued *at the end of the appeal*, and this showed the level of understanding of this had increased to around half.
- Most customers (91%) had direct contact with the VOA during their appeal, and of these 42% had contact at least once a month.
- Around one in three (32%) were approached by an agent during their appeal.
- Half of customers (50%) had an inspection of their property.
- Around one in five customers (19%) reported that their appeal took longer than a year.
- Most customers (62%) said they understood very or fairly well why the decision was taken in relation to their appeal.
- Two in five customers (40%) felt that their decision was wrong.
- Most customers (61%) *first* got in contact with the VOA by telephone.
- In terms of contact *at any point* during the appeal, 80% of customers had contact with the VOA by telephone, 75% by letter, and 51% by email.
- When asked about preferred methods of contact for any future dealings with the VOA, customers' preferences were for telephone (52%) and email (52%) contact, and staff visits (41%).
- Websites were used by around two in three customers (64%) to get information at some point during the process. They predominantly used the VOA website.

- Overall, 46% rated the service they received from the VOA as good, while 38% said it was poor.
- Reasons given for a pleasing experience, or indeed a complaint, were mostly related to perceptions about staff, the standard of communication, and speed/efficiency of service.
- Half (50%) agreed that they trusted the VOA to get the outcome right (compared to 36% who disagreed), and a similar proportion (52%) agreed that their case was dealt with fairly (compared to 31% who disagreed).
- The majority of customers had positive views about staff. This was especially true for ratings of staff being polite and friendly (87%) and professional (82%). The majority were also positive about staff knowledge and expertise (67%) and responding within an appropriate timeframe (61%).
- The outcome of the appeal had a large bearing on customers' views of VOA service and staff: those with a successful outcome were more likely to have positive views, and to say they understood the way properties are valued.
- Attitudes to the VOA and the appeal process were also linked to the length of the appeal, with positive views more prevalent among those with shorter appeals.

Unrepresented CT customers

- Unrepresented CT customers were typically older (24% were 65 or older) than those for NDR.
- Only 6% of unrepresented CT customers said they had made previous separate appeals to the VOA during the previous two years.
- The majority of appeals related to the property that the customer lived in and very few were for rented properties.
- Initial awareness of the VOA appeals process and how properties are valued was fairly low among unrepresented CT customers, although this had increased by the end of the appeal. Levels of awareness were higher among those who had more frequent contact with the VOA.
- Almost all (96%) customers had direct contact with the VOA during their appeal, but the frequency of this contact varied.
- One in eight (12%) were approached by an agent at some point to handle their appeal.
- One in five customers (21%) had an inspection of their property.
- Most customers (58%) understood at least fairly well why the decision was taken in relation to their appeal, although only two in five (42%) thought the right decision had been made.
- Most customers (57%) *first* got in contact with the VOA by telephone.
- In terms of contact *at any point* during the appeal, 86% of customers had contact with the VOA by letter, 65% by telephone, and 26% by email.
- When asked about preferred methods of contact for any *future* dealings with the VOA, the most commonly selected were the three most commonly used at present, ie telephone, letter and email. This was however with smaller proportions selecting telephone (54%) and letter (51%) than had contact via these methods during this appeal, and a greater proportion (42%) selecting email than had used it this time.
- Websites were used by more than two in three customers (70%) to get information at some point during the process, predominantly the VOA website.
- Overall, just over half (55%) rated the service they received from the VOA as good, while 30% said it was poor.
- The most common reasons given for a pleasing experience related to communications and perceptions about staff. The single most common reason for a complaint was disagreement with the decision, followed by issues with staff and communication.
- Customers were divided on whether they trusted the VOA to get the outcome of their appeal right (47% agreed and 43% disagreed), and on whether they felt that their case was dealt with fairly (48% agreed and 39% disagreed).
- The majority of customers had positive views about staff, particularly in relation to being polite and friendly (76%), professional (74%), and responding within an appropriate timeframe (74%).
- The outcome of the appeal had a large bearing on customers' views of VOA service and staff: those with a

successful outcome were more likely to have positive views, and to say they understood the way properties are valued.

- There were differences between different appeal types. Those making a formal appeal: were less likely to appeal about the property they lived in; were less likely to be approached by an agent; were more likely to have a property inspection; and generally felt they had greater knowledge and understanding of the process, than those making an informal challenge.

Represented NDR customers

- Three in four customers (76%) said that this was the first time that they had worked with the agent to make an appeal.
- In most cases, it was the agent that approached the customer (75%) rather than the customer approaching the agent (18%).
- Just 39% of represented customers had direct contact with the VOA during their appeal.
- Websites were used by a quarter (25%) of customers at some point during the process, predominantly the VOA website (20%).
- One in four customers (25%) said they knew a lot or a fair amount about how properties are valued after the appeal.
- Around half (53%) said they understood very or fairly well why the decision was taken in relation to their appeal, and a similar proportion (49%) thought that the VOA had made the right decision.
- Customers were more likely to agree (50%) than disagree (31%) that they trusted the VOA to get the outcome of the appeal right.
- The majority of customers had positive views about staff. This was especially true for ratings of staff being polite and friendly (83%) and professional (78%), while the majority were also positive about staff in relation to their knowledge and expertise (65%).

Represented CT customers

- Just over half of represented CT customers were retired (53%).
- Agents approached customers either by a letter through the door (42%) or through cold calling, either face-to-face (32%) or by telephone (20%).
- Just 18% of represented customers had direct contact with the VOA during their appeal.
- Websites were used for information by 22% of customers at some point during the process, including 12% who visited the VOA website.
- One in six customers (18%) said they knew a lot or a fair amount about how properties are valued after the appeal.
- Around two in five (43%) said they understood very or fairly well why the decision was taken in relation to their appeal, while 48% thought that the VOA had made the right decision.
- Customers were more likely to agree (60%) than disagree (23%) that they trusted the VOA to get the outcome of the appeal right.