



Valuation Office
Agency

VOA 2014 Local Authority Survey

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1. About Information & Analysis (I&A)



Information and Analysis is a Directorate within the Valuation Office Agency's Strategy Group. The Directorate is a multi-disciplinary team, with representatives from all of the main analytical professions – statisticians, operational researchers, social researchers and economists. This is strengthened by the addition of valuer and knowledge and information management professions.

2. Executive Summary



In January 2014 the VOA conducted a survey of Billing Authorities (BAs) in England and Wales and Major Precepting Authorities in England.

Over half of the BAs thought that the VOA provides a good overall service across both Council Tax and Non Domestic Rating (56%). Findings about people and teams within the VOA were positive with around two thirds agreeing that VOA staff had the right level of knowledge and expertise to assist them (68%) and over half agreeing that they received appropriate support from VOA Local Offices (57%). Of the BAs who had received data, two thirds thought the VOA engages constructively with them when they make requests for data (64%).

The Business Rates Retention Scheme was introduced in England in April 2013 and the VOA set up a team of Local Authority Relationship Managers to help support Local Authorities. The survey found the majority of BA respondents in England were aware of having contact with their Relationship Manager (80%). Most thought that Relationship Managers were easy to contact (81%), nearly two thirds thought the Relationship Manager had the right level of knowledge (64%), and over half thought the LARM provided them with the right level of support (54%).

While the survey findings suggest that the VOA has made good progress in the provision of data and engaging with BAs through the Relationship Managers, it also suggests further work needs to be done. Around one in five BAs did not think that the VOA is responsive to changes in their organisation's needs (22%). Some authorities were critical of the support by the VOA since the introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme and the ability of the Agency to deal with an increasing demand for its data and statistics. One in five thought that the VOA did not deliver work within an appropriate timeframe (21%). Around one in seven respondents had a request for data or statistics turned down and did not understand why (14%), while one in eight had a request for intelligence around appeals and reports turned down and did not understand why (12%).

Some of these findings illustrate the difficulties created by data sharing legislation¹ which put limits on the VOA sharing some information desired by Local Authorities.

Findings about the timeliness of work delivered by the VOA left room for improvement. When asked about the work delivered by the VOA as a whole, including for example Council Tax and Non Domestic Rating list alterations, only around two fifths agreed the VOA as a whole delivered work within an appropriate timeframe (43%). However, more than six tenths of those who received data or statistics and intelligence from the VOA agreed that it was provided in a timely manner (61% and 62% respectively).

¹ Data Protection Act, 1998: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents>; Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act, 2005: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/11/contents>

Note: The response rate for BAs is lower than required to generalise our findings to the overall population with high degrees of confidence. The results should only therefore be considered as indicative of the wider population.

3. Introduction



The VOA and Local Authorities (LAs) interact in a broad number of ways across a number of business areas. This relationship has changed most recently following the introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme in April 2013 that enables LAs to keep a proportion of the business rates revenue. As a result there is a new demand for information held by the VOA which can assist LAs with financial planning for rates retention scheme purposes. Local Authority Relationship Managers have been introduced by the VOA to help support LAs since this change in relationship. The 2014 Local Authority Survey helps to understand the VOA's service and to identify areas where the VOA can continue to improve its service and relationships.

4. Methodology



The survey has been redesigned following a consultative review and identification of methodological concerns around sample size, response rates, and target population.

The new survey was designed as a census of all Billing Authorities (BAs) in England and Wales and Major Precepting Authorities (MPAs) in England². A 15 minute online questionnaire was sent to Chief Finance Officers (CFOs) in January 2014, of which 67 per cent delegated to a colleague. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

The survey achieved a total response rate among BAs of 39 per cent and 12 per cent amongst MPAs resulting in an overall response rate of 35 per cent. This disparity of responses may be due to lower levels of contact between MPAs and the VOA and therefore a lower level of interest in participating in the survey³.

The response rate for BAs is still lower than required to generalise our findings to the overall population with high degrees of confidence. The results should only therefore be considered as indicative of the wider population.

Appendix B provides the response rates broken down by the VOA Unit the Local Authority deals with (Council Tax Unit or Non Domestic Rating Unit) and the number of hereditaments (properties) and total rateable value. Variations in response rates across these characteristics indicate a clear set of response biases and the results should be interpreted with care (rounded base numbers are included in each graph to help aid interpretation).

There are variations in response rates by the VOA Unit⁴ which BAs dealt with. For both Non Domestic Rating and Council Tax, Wales had the highest response rate at 82 per cent. The West Council Tax Unit had the lowest response rate at 26 per cent. For Non Domestic Rating, the lowest was Central at 28 per cent.

Response rates are highest amongst BAs with the most hereditaments and also those with the lowest total RV. The reasons for this response bias may be that those who are most engaged are more likely to respond. BAs with many hereditaments are likely

² Billing Authorities are responsible for the collection of Business Rates and Council Tax. They also have a statutory function to inform the Valuation Officer or Listing Officer where an alteration to the Rating or Valuation list maybe required. As part of Business Rates Retention Scheme, where it is a two-tier area the Billing Authority will pass a proportion of the Business Rates collected to the Major Precepting Authority. The VOA took the decision to exclude Welsh MPAs as the VOA currently has little interaction with them beyond the valuation of properties they occupy. A Welsh translation of the questionnaire was available for respondents in Wales.

³ As the response rate among MPAs represents a total of fewer than ten responses, further disaggregation was considered potentially disclosive, and so no further MPA results are reported. This is in line with Government Social Research guidance for disclosure: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/best-practice/disclosure-control-policy-for-tables/index.html>

to be more aware of, and have more interactions with, the VOA. In contrast, CFOs that are responsible for authorities with a larger total RVs may be less likely to engage with the survey because of the demands created by their large budget.

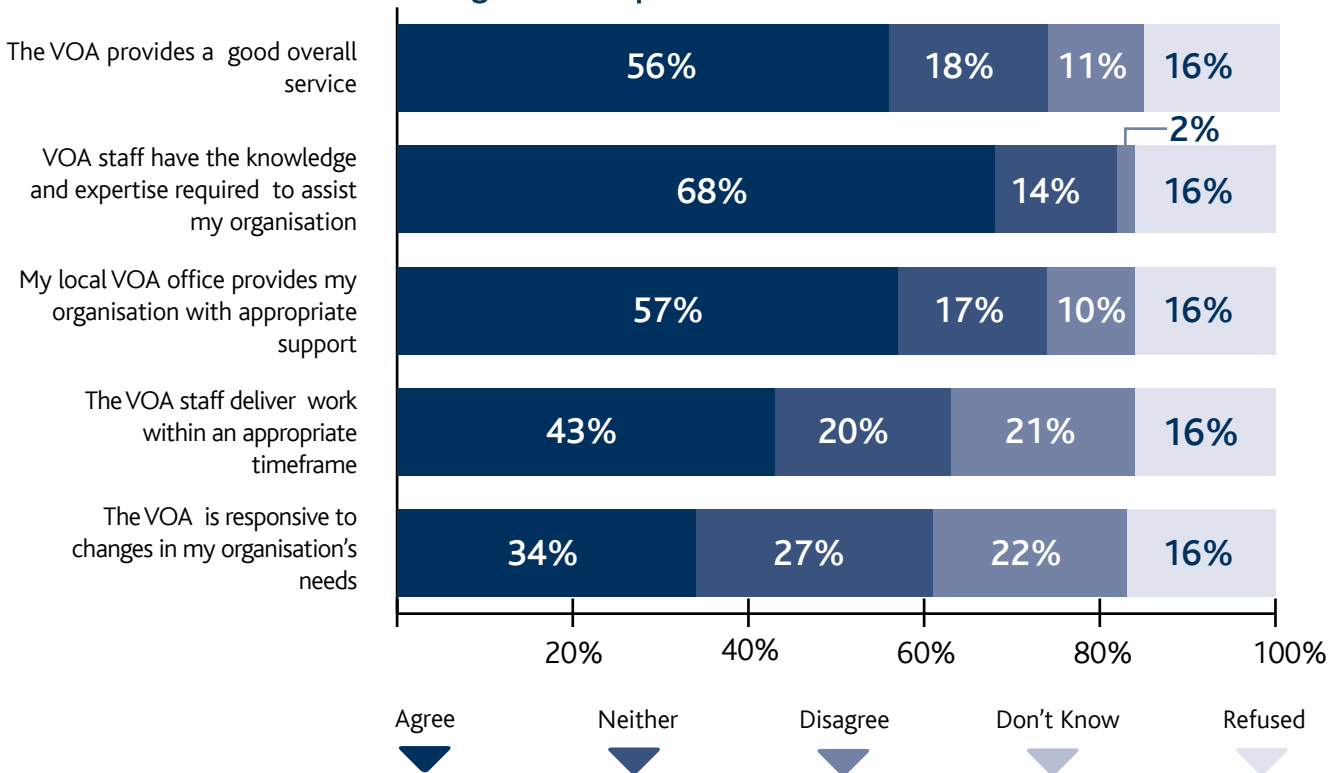
5. The VOA's Overall Service



The results in this section report BAs' experience of dealing with the VOA as a whole, specifically looking at; overall service, timeliness of work delivered, being responsive to change, knowledge and expertise and local support.

Figure 1 shows that over half of BAs thought the VOA provides a good overall service across both Council Tax and Non Domestic Rating (56%).

Figure 1: Perceptions of the VOA's service overall



Rounded base size: 110; BAs in England & Wales

Findings about teams and individuals in the VOA were generally positive. Two thirds of BAs thought VOA staff have the knowledge and expertise to help them (68%). Over half thought their local VOA office provides them with appropriate support (57%) though some concerns were expressed over local office resources and the movement of work between local offices, for example:

"... we doubt our local office having the resources [sic] to deal with a possible influx of Billing Authority Reports (BARs)"

"When we ring the [Local] Office if the phone diverts we have found that it diverts to another office i ... who are unable to deal with our query. The quality of the service you provide to us would suffer if the [Local] office were to close."

Three out of four survey questions help to predict BAs' perception of the VOA's overall service, these being "The VOA is responsive to changes in my organisation's needs", "The VOA and its staff deliver work within an appropriate timeframe", and "My local VOA office provides my organisation with appropriate support". Staff knowledge and expertise, size, Rateable Value (RV) and geographic location were not seen to affect perceptions.

The survey findings suggest further work by the VOA needs to be done. Less than half of BAs thought that the VOA delivers work within an appropriate timeframe (43%), and only a third thought that the VOA is responsive to changes in their organisation's needs (34%). The timeliness with which raw data, statistics and intelligence are provided to LAs has been measured in the survey and is reported on pages 5 and 6.

Since the survey was carried out in January 2014, the VOA reviewed and published new timeliness targets for processing reports. In the future the focus on these new performance measures could help to improve the experience for LAs.

The VOA also put in place a new Local Authority Partnership Charter in consultation with LAs in response to the changing relationship brought about by the introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme. The new charter provides an opportunity for LAs and valuation officers/listing officers to discuss how to develop a better working relationship. Further actions were taken in parallel to this to support Authorities during this period of change and are explored in the Rates Retention Scheme section of this report, below.

6. Support to Local Authorities Following the Introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme

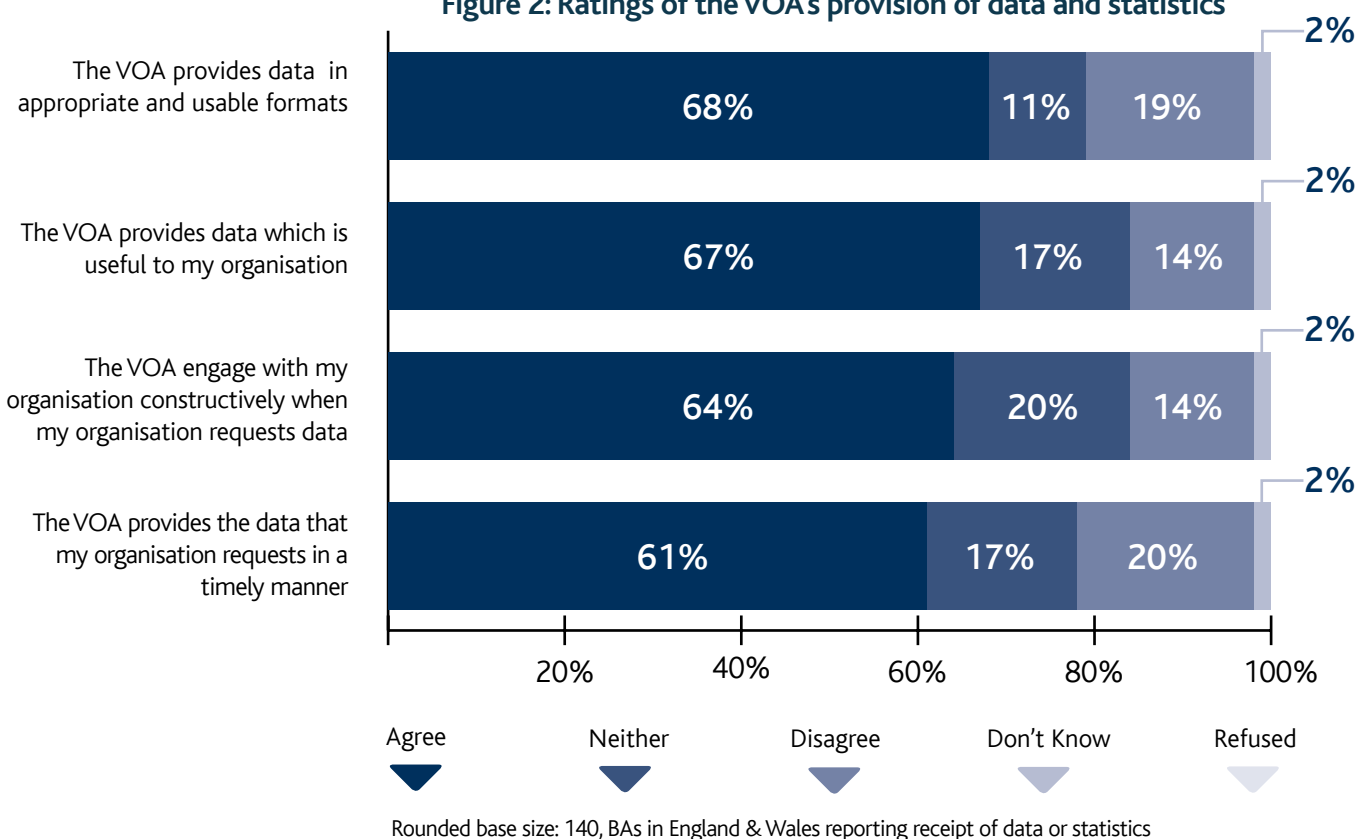
The following sections of the report deal with changes in service the VOA has implemented since the introduction of the Rates Retention scheme in England: specifically an increase in provision of raw data, statistics and intelligence and the introduction of the Local Authority Relationship Manager.

Before each series of questions in this section respondents were asked if they had received that particular service before being asked follow up questions (see questionnaire, Appendix C). Perhaps because the Rates Retention Scheme is restricted to England only a minority of Welsh authorities had requested raw data and statistics or intelligence. Further, as the role was introduced to support Authorities under the scheme, Welsh Authorities do not have a Relationship Manager, and were not asked the question.

6. 1 Data and Statistics

In the preceding 12 months four fifths of BAs in England and Wales reported receiving data and statistics from the VOA (81%). Figure 2 shows the majority were positive about the VOA's provision of data and statistics with more than six in ten agreeing with each of the four follow up statements. BAs were most likely to agree that the data came in a usable format (68%) and that the data were useful (67%). They were least likely to find that the data came in a timely manner (61%).

Figure 2: Ratings of the VOA's provision of data and statistics



While 64 per cent agreed the VOA engages constructively with their organisation on data requests, some viewed the VOA as largely unprepared for the level of interest generated by the Rates Retention Scheme and expressed frustration at valuable information being withheld.

“The VOA appears to lack the ability to provide ad hoc information even when this is of the highest importance to my organisation”

“I appreciate the VOA were as prepared as us for the localisation of business rates, but your approach has been about what you can’t do rather than what you can or are willing to do”

Over half of BAs (53%) reported they had had a request for data or statistics refused in the last 12 months. More than twice as many understood the reasons for the VOA not fulfilling the request, 39 per cent compared with 14 per cent who did not. Some authorities displayed an understanding of the legislation and regulations that prevent the sharing of some data with LAs, though they also indicated that this carries a cost implication, a reputational risk for government, potential duplication of work by central and local government and tax payers begrudge providing the same information to different bodies. Examples were given where lack of information from the VOA impeded day-to-day operational functions of the LAs.

6.2 Intelligence

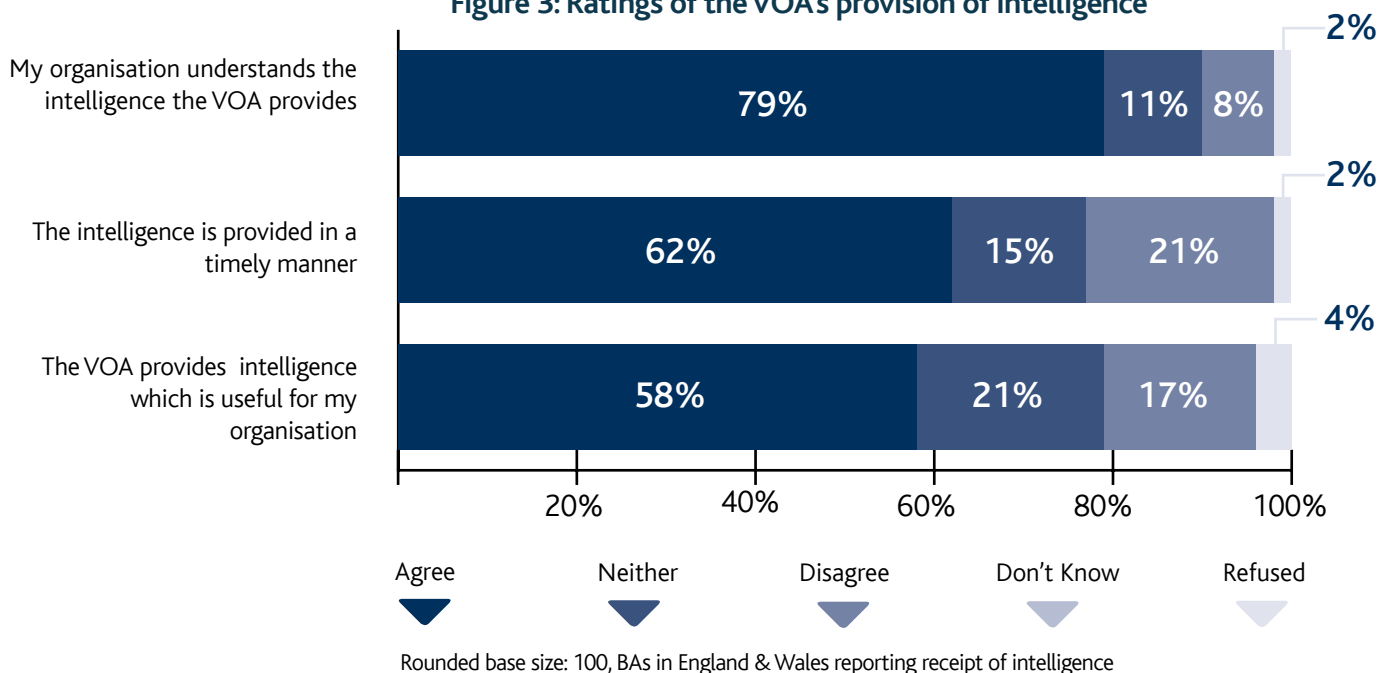
During the testing stages of the survey LAs identified ‘intelligence’ as being distinct from raw data and statistics. In the survey itself, intelligence is defined as “information around the nature of outstanding appeals,

advance warning of upcoming changes in the list, guidance on how properties are valued and anticipated timescales around report clearance etc.”

Seventy per cent of BAs in England and Wales said that their organisation had received intelligence from the VOA within the previous 12 months.

Of those who received intelligence, 79 per cent agreed they understood the intelligence provided and 58 per cent agreed the intelligence was useful (see Figure 3). A similar proportion agreed the provision of intelligence was timely as those who agreed the provision of data and statistics was timely (62 % compared with 61 %). These findings suggest future work could focus on making the intelligence more timely and useful for the BAs’ purposes, while operating within the legal constraints.

Figure 3: Ratings of the VOA’s provision of intelligence



More than twice as many BAs across England and Wales, who had an intelligence request turned down in the last 12 months understood the reasons why compared with those who did not (35% and 12% respectively). This finding is consistent with the same question for data and statistics requests.

Suggestions were made for the provision of further intelligence in the comments section. BAs asked the VOA to share their views on the possible outcome of appeals, which do not necessarily prejudice or pre-empt Tribunal decisions, earlier in the process. They indicated this was because schedules of appeals are of limited use in helping them to forecast outcomes. They also asked to be consulted more over valuations and appeals prior to resolution.

“The VOA also need to communicate more with Local Government on their decisions and ensure that they take into account all relevant information when making assessments.”

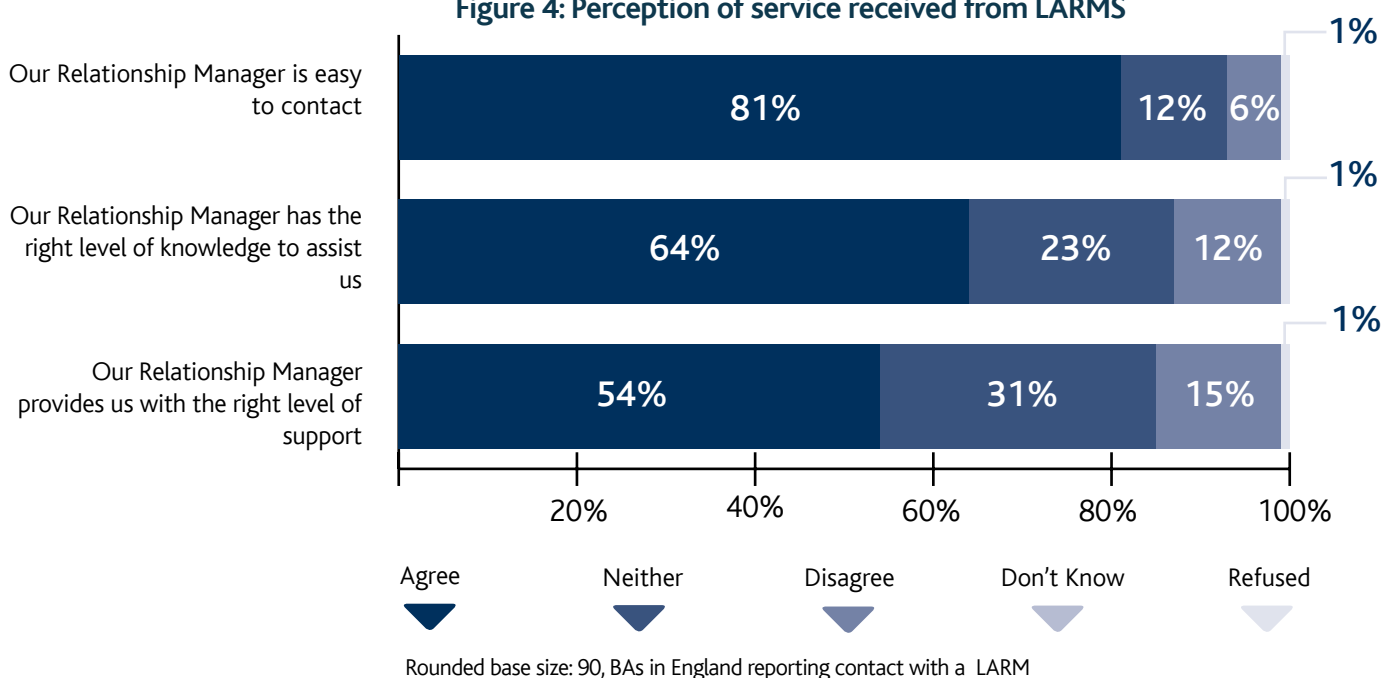
"Information regarding appeals, particularly the lack of involvement of the Authority in the settlement of appeals prior to the resolution [would be an improvement]."

6.3 Local Authority Relationship Managers

The VOA introduced Local Authority Relationship Managers (LARM) to assist LAs after the introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme. Eighty per cent of BAs across England reported having contact with a LARM.

Figure 4 shows that most BAs found it easy to contact their LARM (81%). Some suggested they would like more regular or more proactive contact and to help them do this Relationship Managers might cover fewer LAs. This indicates BAs find the support offered by Relationship Managers useful and would like more.

Figure 4: Perception of service received from LARMS



Most BAs agreed that the Relationship Managers had the right level of knowledge (64%). Some suggested Relationship Managers might gain a better knowledge of local issues and technical issues to help reduce the need to refer questions onto other VOA staff.

Fifty four per cent agreed that the Relationship Managers gave them the right level of support. Comments supported this and welcomed the introduction of the role and the individuals performing it.

"The establishment of this role has been a great help to local authorities at a time of significant change, in particular in relation to the Business Rates Retention Scheme".

Suggestions for how the role could be improved included; Relationship Managers developing their understanding of the pressures and issues facing LAs, particularly around financial forecasting; more hands on assistance with providing information to central government, and a monthly bulletin to highlight any regulatory changes.

7. Business as Usual

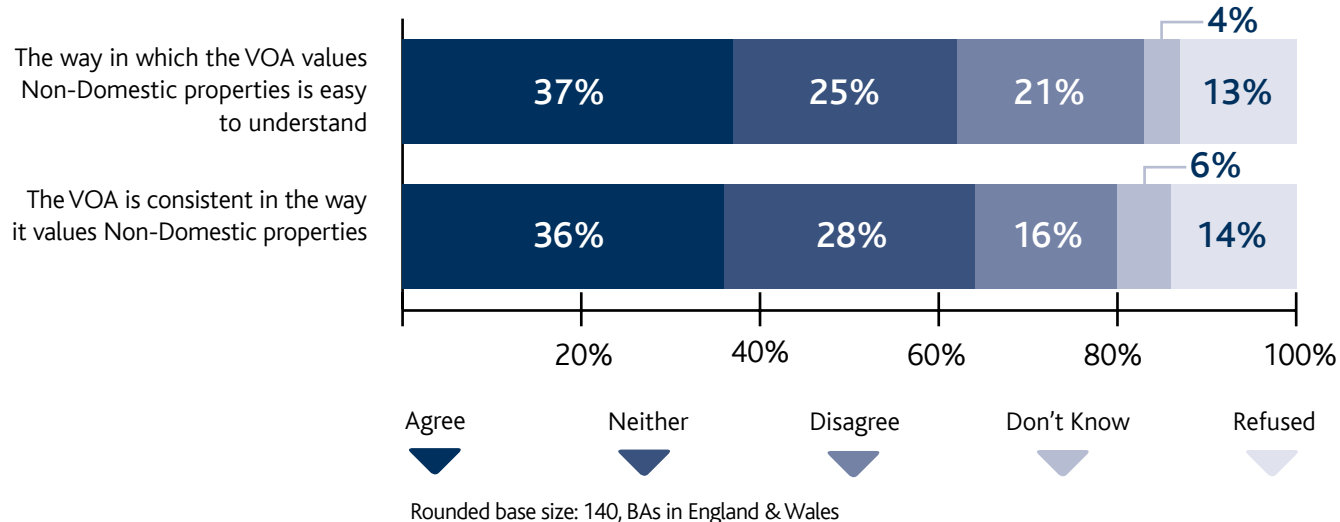


The VOA and LAs in England and Wales have regular interactions in their day-to-day operations that pre-dated the introduction of the Rates Retention Scheme. This section considers these interactions in more detail, specifically, non-domestic and domestic valuations, BAs sharing data with the VOA, and dealing with issues and complaints.

7.1 Non-Domestic Valuation

Figure 5 shows that more than twice as many BAs agreed that the VOA was consistent in the way it valued non-domestic properties as those who did not (36% and 16% respectively). Similarly more BAs thought that the way the VOA values non domestic properties was easy to understand (37%) compared with those who did not (21%).

Figure 5: Responses to statements on how the VOA values Non-Domestic properties



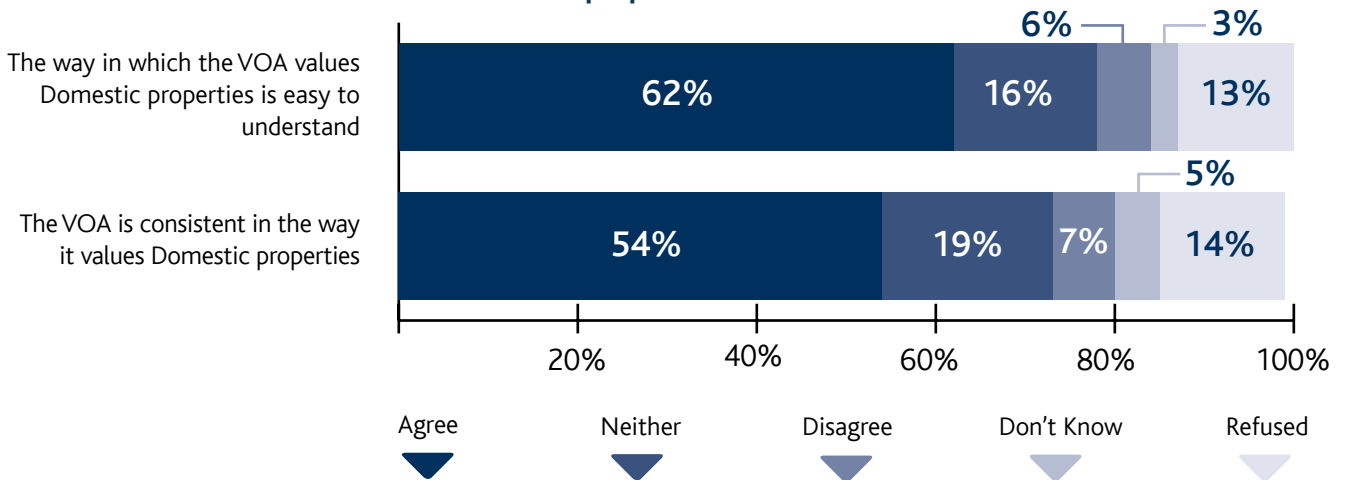
BA comments on the non domestic valuation process highlighted perceptions of problems that they felt were impacting on their financial planning. For example, some felt that a high number of successful appeals means there was something wrong with the initial valuation process and that large drops in RV were on the increase. Findings also suggested that greater transparency around how valuations are determined may lead to fewer complaints and appeals. Lengthy backlogs of appeals and the requirement for BAs to backdate repayments also causes “headaches” in an area that is beyond authorities’ control. It was felt that an improvement to the processing of appeals and getting valuations right first time would greatly ease BA financial planning.

“We understand the VOA is under pressure in respect of appeals but the time taken to resolve is too lengthy and the intelligence about the risks to Council NNDR [National Non-Domestic Rates] flows has been too slow in coming out. We appreciate that the VOA is trying to rectify this and things are improving.”

7.2 Domestic Valuation

More BAs thought that the VOA was consistent and that valuations were easy to understand for domestic properties than non domestic properties (Figure 6 compared with Figure 5). More than seven times as many BAs agreed the VOA was consistent in the way it valued domestic properties than those who did not (54% and 7% respectively). Similarly more than ten times as many BAs agreed the way the VOA valued domestic properties was easy to understand (62%) compared with those who did not (6%).

Figure 6: Responses to statements on how the VOA values Domestic properties



Rounded base size: 140, BAs in England & Wales

Further analysis found that for both domestic and non domestic perceived ease of understanding of the way the VOA values properties strongly predicts perceived consistency. This may mean that improving communication around the detail of the valuation process to local authorities will improve the VOA's perceived consistency.

7.3 Sharing Data with the VOA

Through operational processes and as part of the legislative requirements, BAs share information with the VOA, in particular by means of completion notices and Billing Authority Reports.

Most BAs in England and Wales report issuing completion notices or having plans to issue them (86%). While only a small proportion face barriers to issuing completion notices, the findings suggest these barriers need exploring in order to overcome them.

Seventy per cent of local authorities supply additional information through Billing Authority Reports. For those who did not, comments indicated this was because they were constrained by time, they did not hold the information or they did not feel it was their organisations role to provide it.

The majority of BAs believed they understood what information they were legally required to share with the VOA (84%). However, the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005 restricts the VOA from sharing some information with LAs. Frustration was expressed at

the perceived disparity in the data sharing relationship between BAs and the VOA whereby BAs are bound to provide the VOA with occupier information but the VOA is prevented from reciprocating.

"It is a major issue that the LA and the VOA are unable to share information regarding names of Taxpayers and Ratepayers. The LA must give the information to the VOA but VOA are not empowered to provide the LA with information. As this information is for the collection of a tax on behalf of both the Government and the LA it seems unreasonable."

"Why do you not provide the same level of information that Authorities are required to give you i.e. names of occupiers or owners. We are required to tell you, but where you know and we don't, you will not give us the information..."

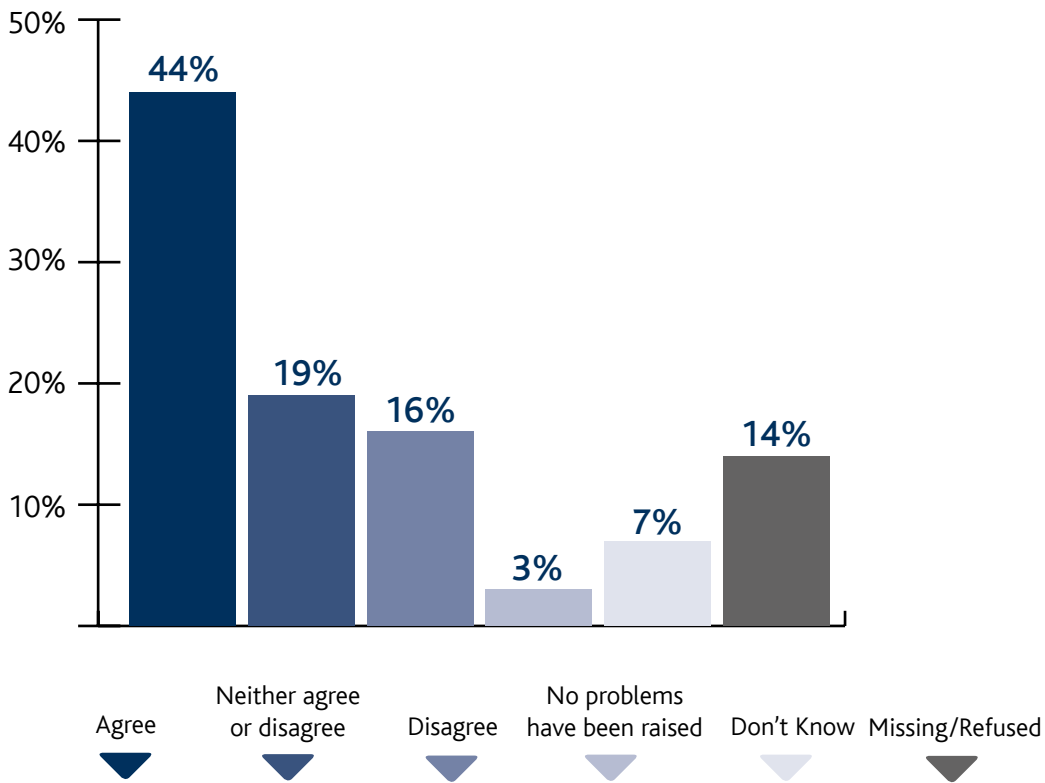
The VOA has subsequently consulted with LAs over how to improve what they provide within the current legal framework (see data and statistics and intelligence p5-6). Although the VOA is still working to improve this it may be that the VOA is not legally able to provide LAs with all the information they want.

7.4 Issues and Complaints

The VOA has a formal complaints procedure which LAs can use to raise issues. During 2013, the VOA received fewer than 15 complaints through this process. This number is too small to draw any conclusions from and reporting feedback on this would risk disclosing the identity of complainants.

LAs were asked how the VOA deals with concerns and problems informally, outside of the formal procedure. Figure 7 shows 44 per cent of BAs thought the VOA deals with concerns effectively, compared with 16 per cent who disagreed.

Figure 7: Respondents perception of how effectively the VOA deals with concerns raised



Rounded base size: 140, BAs in England & Wales

Appendices



Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

Billing Authority: Local authorities that collect Council Tax and Non Domestic Rating. E.g. district councils and unitary authorities.

Billing Authority Reports: Billing authorities have a statutory duty to notify the VOA where they believe changes may be required to a non domestic rating or domestic valuation list respectively. This information is submitted in Billing Authority Reports.

Council Tax: Local taxation paid on domestic properties.

Completion Notices: Billing authorities can serve completion notices on new properties, or on properties that have been substantially, structurally altered. A completion notice gives the day the council thinks the property was finished by, or could have been finished by. This is the date from which council tax or business rates will be payable.

Hereditament: A single premises for the purposes of taxation.

Local Authority Relationship Manager: A role introduced by the VOA to provide support to local authorities

Major Precepting Authority: Local authorities that collect a share of taxation from billing authorities. E.g. county councils, fire authorities and the Greater London Authority.

Non Domestic Rates: Local taxation paid on non domestic properties.

Rateable Value: The notional value of a property set by the VOA for the purposes of calculating of non domestic rates.

Rates Retention: A scheme introduced in 2013 that allows local authorities to keep a share of any growth in rates collected in their area.

Appendix B: Data Tables

*Response rates given are the proportion of the respondents that reported belonging to each group as a proportion of the population.

East	42%
North	38%
South	37%
West	26%
Wales	82%

Central	28%
East	42%
London	42%
North East	36%
North West	41%
South East	33%
South West	31%
Wales	82%

Less than 5,000	32%
5,000 to 10,000	43%
More than 10,000	47%

Less than £50 million	59%
Between £50 million and £100 million	42%
Between £100 million and £150 million	36%
£150 million or more	27%

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
My local VOA office provides my organisation with appropriate support	57%	17%	10%	0%	16%
VOA staff have the knowledge and expertise required to assist my organisation	68%	14%	2%	0%	16%
The VOA is responsive to changes in my organisation's needs	34%	27%	22%	0%	17%
The VOA and its staff deliver work within an appropriate timeframe	43%	20%	21%	0%	16%
The VOA provides a good overall service	56%	18%	11%	0%	16%

Rounded base size: 110; Billing Authorities in England & Wales

"Have you or your organisation received data from the VOA within the last 12 months?"	
Yes	81%
No	6%
Don't Know	4%
Refused	9%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
The VOA provides the data that my organisation requests in a timely manner	61%	17%	20%	2%	0%
The VOA provides data in appropriate and usable formats	68%	11%	19%	2%	0%
The VOA provides data which is useful to my organisation	67%	17%	14%	2%	0%
The VOA engage with my organisation constructively when my organisation requests data	64%	20%	14%	2%	0%

Rounded base size: 110; Billing Authorities that reported receiving Data and Statistics in England and Wales

"In the last 12 months have the VOA ever been unable to provide data which you have requested?"	
Yes, and I understand the reasons why the VOA did not provide it	39%
Yes, but I do not understand the reasons why the VOA did not provide it	14%
No	25%
Don't Know	13%
Refused	9%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

"Have you or your organisation received intelligence around appeals or outstanding reports from the VOA within the last 12 months?"	
Yes	70%
No	13%
Don't Know	7%
Refused	10%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
The intelligence is provided in a timely manner	62%	15%	21%	0%	2%
My organisation understands the intelligence the VOA provides	79%	11%	8%	0%	2%
The VOA provides intelligence which is useful to my organisation	58%	21%	17%	0%	4%

Rounded base size: 100; Billing Authorities that reported receiving intelligence in England and Wales

Table 11: Understanding of reasons VOA is unable to provide intelligence	
"In the last 12 months have the VOA ever been unable to provide intelligence that you have requested?"	
Yes, and I understand the reasons why the VOA did not provide it	39%
Yes, but I do not understand the reasons why the VOA did not provide it	14%
No	25%
Don't Know	13%
Refused	9%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

Table 12: Contact with Local Authority Relationship Manager	
"Does your organisation have contact with a Relationship Manager at the VOA?"	
Yes	80%
No	4%
Don't Know	3%
Refused	12%

Rounded base size: 120; Billing Authorities in England

Table 13: Perceptions of Local Authority Relationship Managers					
	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
Our Relationship Manager is easy to contact	81%	12%	6%	1%	0%
Our Relationship Manager has the right level of knowledge to assist us	64%	23%	12%	1%	0%
Our Relationship Manager provides us with the right level of support	54%	31%	15%	1%	0%

Rounded base size: 90; Billing Authorities in England that reported contact with a Relationship Manager.

Table 14: Perceptions of non domestic valuation					
	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
The way in which the VOA values non domestic properties is easy to understand	37%	25%	21%	4%	13%
The VOA is consistent in the way it values non domestic properties	36%	28%	16%	6%	14%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
The way in which the VOA values domestic properties is easy to understand	62%	16%	6%	3%	13%
The VOA is consistent in the way it values domestic properties	54%	19%	7%	5%	14%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

"Which of the following statements best describes your situation?"	
My organisation issues completion notices	79%
My organisation does not issue completion notices but plans to	7%
My organisation does not issue completion notices and has no plans to	2%
I know what completion notices are but do not know if my organisation issues them	4%
I do not know what completion notices are	3%
Refused	5%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

"Do you ever supply additional information with Billing Authority Reports (BARs or E-BARs) such as plans and occupier details?"	
Yes	70%
No	5%
Don't Know	18%
Refused	7%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Refused
I understand what information my organisation is legally required to provide the VOA with	84%	6%	1%	1%	8%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	No problems have been raised	Refused	Missing/ refused
The VOA deals effectively with problems and concerns when they are raised	44%	19%	16%	3%	7%	14%

Rounded base size: 140; Billing Authorities in England and Wales

Appendix C: – Local Authority Survey 2014 Questionnaire and Invitation Email

Click here to view the [Local Authority Survey 2014 Questionnaire and Invitation Email](#).