

**Addendum to National Audit Office online Report on the British Council:
Support Services.**

**National Audit Office survey of British Council staff on their perceptions of the
performance of support services**

In October 2007, we conducted an on-line census of British Council employees to gather their views on the performance of support services (IT, Finance and FABS, Human Resources, Procurement and Estates) in enabling them to do their job. We received 1,244 responses giving us a response rate of 16 per cent.¹ 39 per cent of those who responded work in the UK and 60 per cent work in the Council's overseas network.

This addendum summarises the responses from this survey.

Summary findings

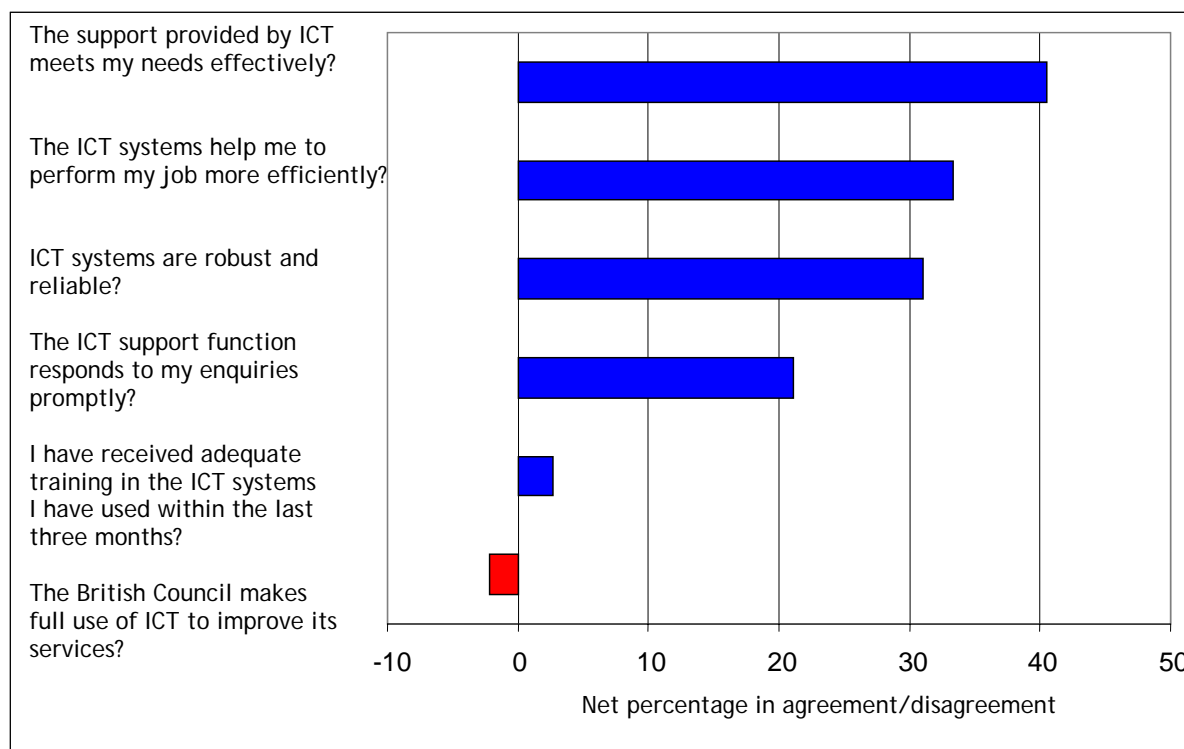
There was a high degree of variation by Region. The UK had among the lowest satisfaction scores for all topics, with the exception of questions on pay, benefits and diversity where UK respondents were the most satisfied. Teaching staff also had lower scores than non-teachers.

Staff expressed the highest level of satisfaction with estates, diversity issues and the general ICT environment. Users of FABS were the least satisfied with all questions a generating net dissatisfaction rating.

Many users took advantage of the comments boxes to provide explanations for their ratings, and to make suggestions for improvements.

¹ This is likely to be understating the response rate given that not all the 7,900 Council staff would have access to the internet during that three week period.

ICT: To what extent do you agree that²



Additional information

There is a high level of Regional variation in satisfaction with IT systems, connectivity and customer support. While 88 per cent of respondents in Central and South East Asia agreed or strongly agreed that Council's ICT systems help them to perform their job more efficiently, this fell to 30 per cent in the UK.

Analysis of user comments

- There was a general recognition among users that system availability and performance is good and had improved in recent months.
- A number of respondents felt that the Council has historically been slow to implement customer focused IT solutions, for example, the lack of a contacts management system or the ability for customers to pay on line.
- Staff would welcome better access to remote working - ROAM is seen as a positive step, but users feel that it needs more time to bed in.

² Net agreement/disagreement indicates the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements we put to them in our survey. Net agreement is calculated by subtracting the negative responses (i.e. those who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement) from the positive ones. For example, if 60 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with a statement and 40 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with it, the net rating would be a 20 percent agreement.

- Many users expressed disappointment that the Council, given its mission to be creative and to communicate, did not make more use of new technology to better reach its target audiences, for example using Social networking forum, Instant Messaging and Voice over Internet technology.
- More bottom-up ICT development would be welcomed by users with the Council increasing staff consultation, especially regarding training, and being more flexible in delivering ICT solutions.

We need to exploit ICT much better to manage relationships; we still haven't implemented a Customer Relationship Management solution and, for an organisation that is about building relationships, this is hard to understand...

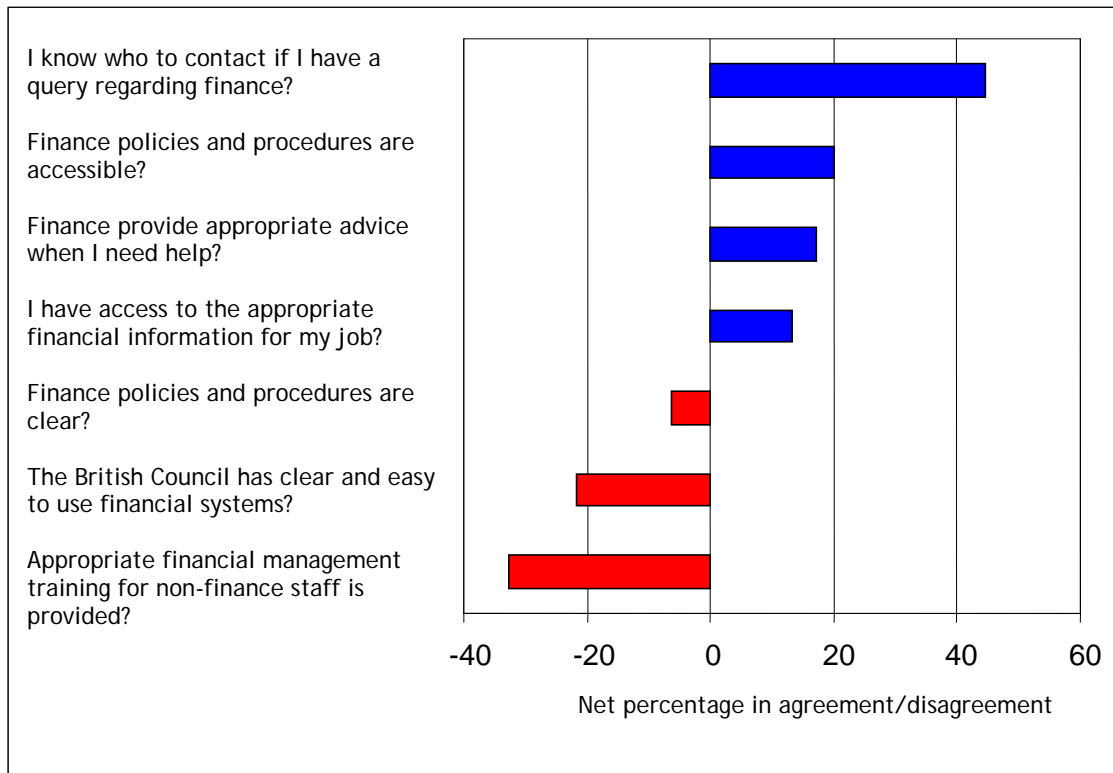
I would like the ICT team to be more pro-active about finding out what training staff need. It would be helpful if we were to develop global online questionnaires that all staff can respond to on a country basis, to inform country training needs

In general the IT systems are very good... There is a good support system whereby any-backing up or mending of the system is done outside core hours.

I feel ICT is still very internally focused and doesn't think about the end user

The systems are, on the whole, quite satisfactory regarding speed. I feel frustrated that we are not using systems to full potential, mainly because of 'GT12 compliance' issues. For example, the centre's Online Public Access Catalogue, which enables customers to check the availability of materials went off almost two years ago (since GT12). Our IT administrator has tried to make it available again, but no solution in sight

Finance: To what extent do you agree that:

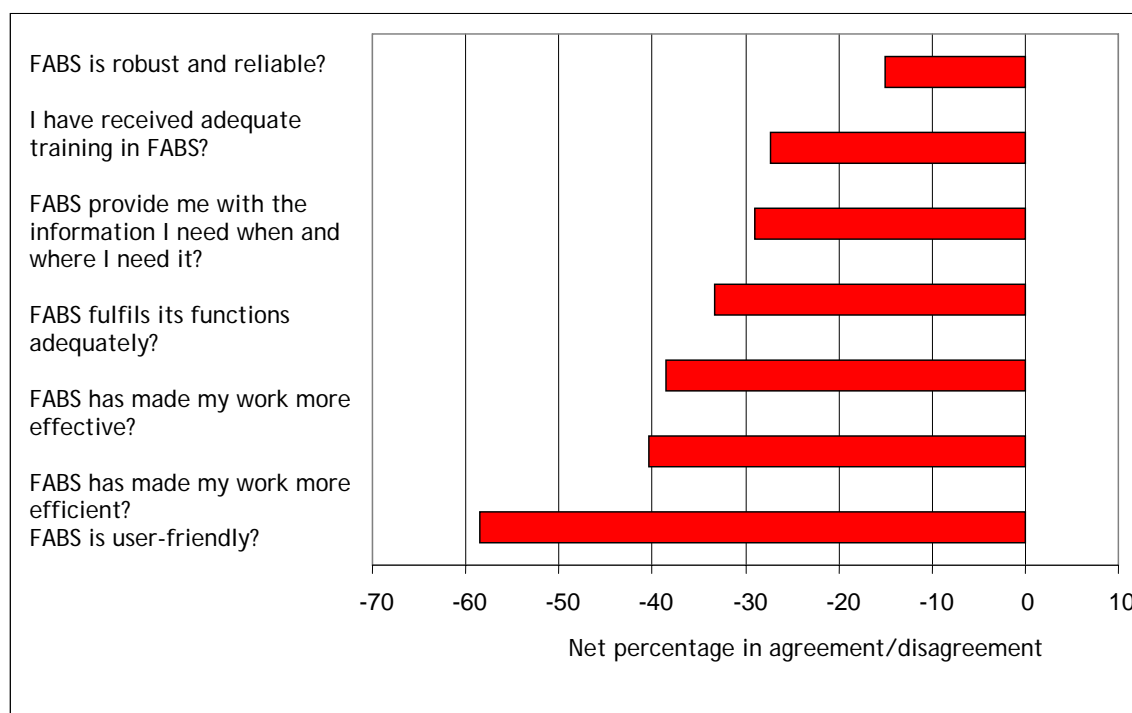


Additional information

Teachers were more negative about finance training than other Council staff, with 70% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement that “appropriate financial management training for non-finance staff is provided.”

Respondents used the comment box mainly for remarks relating to the new resource management system (FABS), see below.

FABS: To what extent do you agree that;



Additional information

Respondents were more critical of the performance of FABS than of any other area of the survey, however it should be noted that only 70% of staff stated that they use FABS as part of their work, therefore the sample for these questions was 857 not 1,244.

There was a large regional variation in responses to FABS; Over 60 per cent of respondents in two Regions agreed or strongly agreed that "FABS has made my work more effective," whereas six regions had under 20 per cent agreement. One Region had no users at all agreeing that FABS had made their work more effective.

Responses were negative even among regions which have been running FABS for over two years, although India and Sri Lanka (the second region to roll out FABS) has the highest satisfaction ratings across all questions, suggesting that satisfaction may increase as users become more familiar with the system.

Particular issues noted by respondents were that;

- day-to-day processes take longer than before, often greatly so, diverting operational staff from customer facing activities and, in some cases, leading to lower morale.
- the user interface is counter-intuitive, over-complicated and has to be re-learned by infrequent users.
- Users reported varying experiences with the training on the system. Training was often regarded as being too process-focused and not enough about how to exploit the system, or carry out practical

tasks. Procedures were viewed as changing too frequently so that any learning effect was negated.

However, there were some positive comments;

- Some respondents felt that the system had great potential, such as quicker availability of real time information and the ability to conduct more detailed queries, for users prepared to invest the time and effort to assimilate it.

In terms of day to day processes (booking travel, purchasing stationary etc) these tasks take longer [through FABS] and are more frustrating

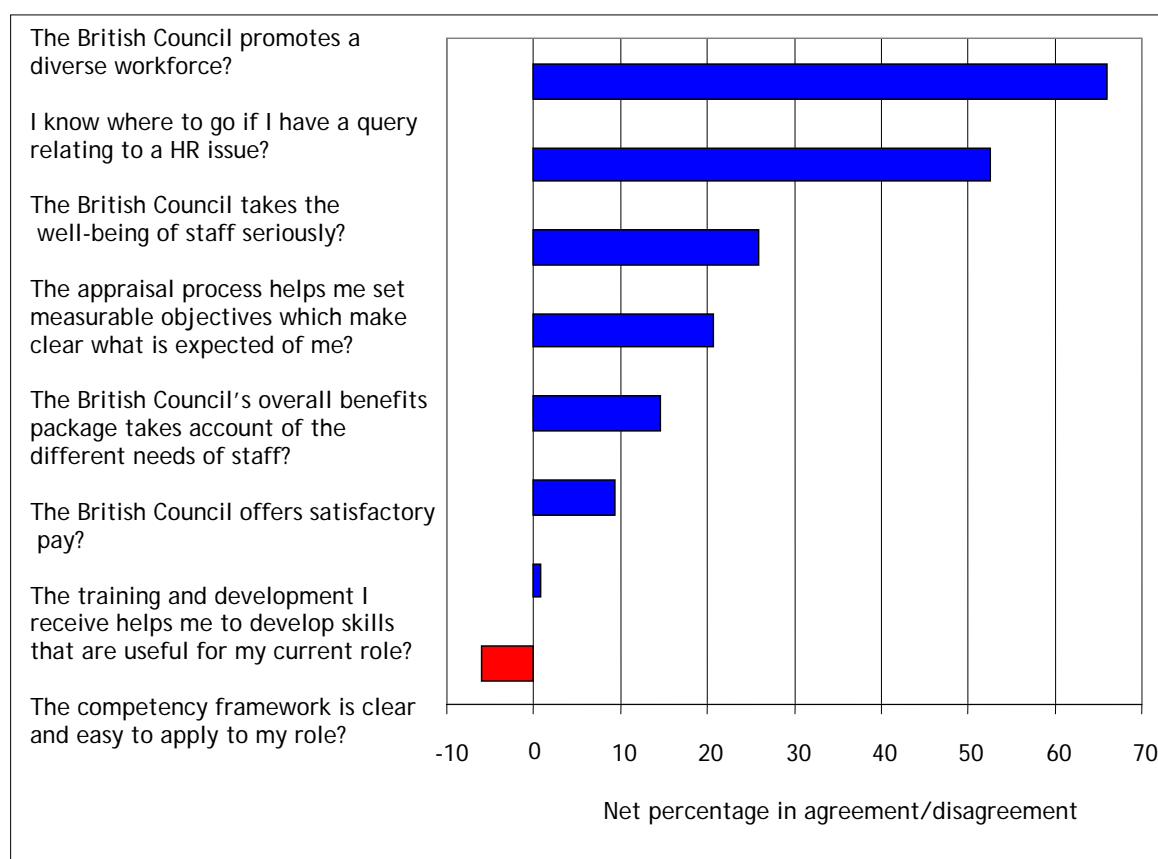
FABS has given me the information I need on who is spending money with whom and how much. It is an improvement on the previous system in that we can drill down further and carry out far more detailed queries

FABS is a very useful tool which provides a lot of transparency and real time information. However, it is not very easy to use... It really requires a lot of time to learn how to use FABS.

Whilst I am able to find the summarised information for my budgets, it is difficult to really find out the detail behind that expenditure. It is not possible to easily compare budgets with expenditure; we still don't have planning tools built into the system

Training was inadequate [and FABS] is not being used to the full extent of its capacity: training was at a functional level "how to input"... we really need more on how it helps with planning and monitoring financial activity

Human Resources: to what extent do you agreed that



Additional information

Teachers tended to be more negative of Human Resources issues, especially regarding statements on well-being, pay and benefits. However, teachers were more positive than others on training, with 60 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that "The training and development I receive helps me to develop skills that are useful for my current role."

Council staff working in Southern Africa were the most negative when responding to statements relating to Human Resources, although they agreed that they knew where to go in the event of a Human Resources query.

Comments from respondents

- The work was rewarding and the Council is often regarded as a good employer.
- The restructuring and change programme has had effects on the morale of staff - several reported feeling undervalued.
- Training and development was frequently mentioned as a problem area - staff felt that they were not offered suitable development opportunities, that training was infrequent and difficult to take up due to work commitments, and that many did not have a Personal Development Plan.

- Many staff mentioned that for locally recruited staff, and those below middle management grades, the pay was too low to be competitive and this was having an impact on recruitment and retention. Comments also reflected a perceived inequality gap in pay and benefits between UK staff and locally recruited staff, especially with regards to maternity leave and pensions.
- There were many comments over the appraisal process and managing performance (especially poor performance). Some staff felt that the Council does not monitor/allows non-compliance. Teachers felt that the competencies did not apply to their role, and general staff raised concerns over the clarity of competencies and the time it took to complete the forms.³
- Internal recruitment processes, based on competencies were felt to be burdensome, especially when staff moved around in the same grade. Also, some users commented that gaps in filling key posts created a burden on teams.
- Despite having a high overall net satisfaction rating, some respondents displayed confusion as to who to approach with a Human Resources query - central or Regional Human Resources. Employees appreciated that the central Human Resources team had a heavy workload.

Wellbeing is taken seriously on the one hand, however this is not reflected in salary...A more equal distribution of pay and benefits would be motivating and fair

Training and development is not the BC's strong point, although corporately we claim to 'value people'. The corporate training budget was cut recently, and the range of courses offered scaled down

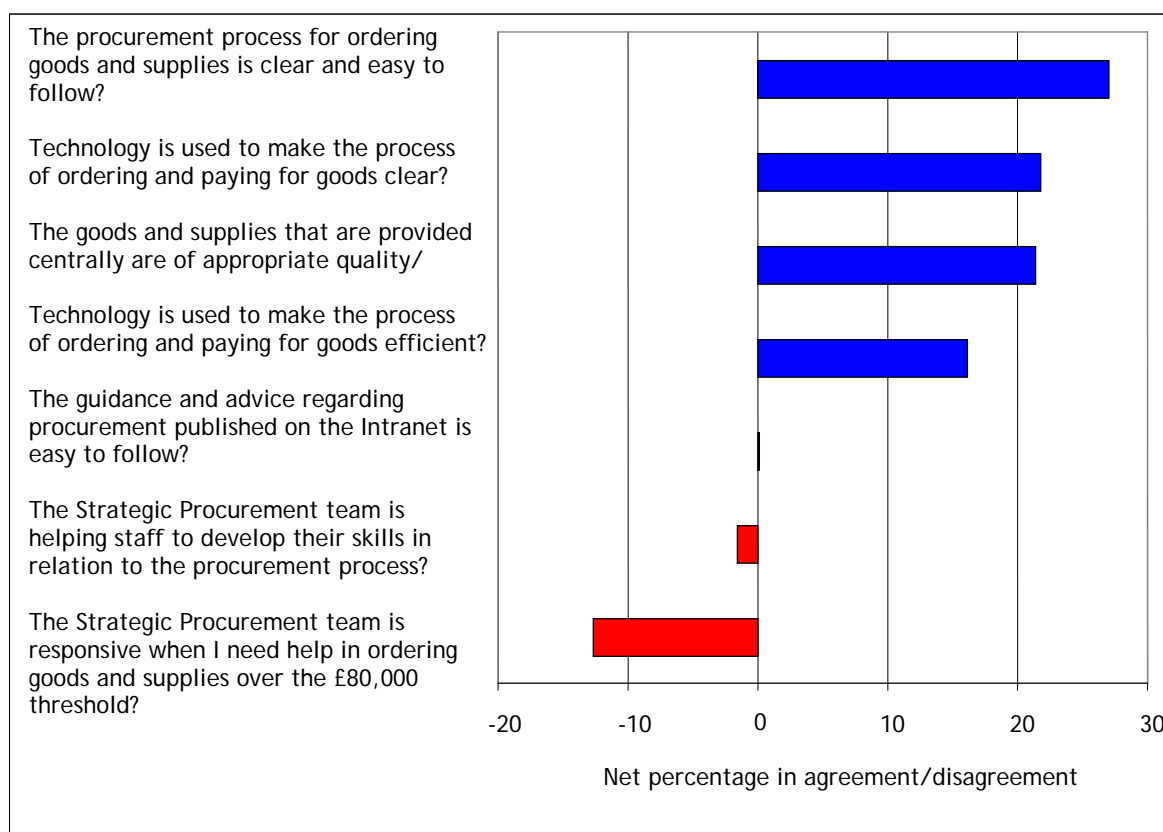
Currently it seems to be not clear at all who is responsible for what... Roles in HR need more clarity and I am not always sure who to approach with queries

There are tensions within the system during this period of restructuring and it has left many people feeling that the Organisation does not value its staff or their wellbeing

Although wellbeing initiatives are in place - I don't feel that the recent stresses that staff have been undergoing as part of a huge organisational change programme have been adequately addressed.

³ The British Council has recently announced changes to its performance measurement system (see *British Council: Support Services* (online), part 5)

Procurement: To what extent do you agree that:



Additional information

There were many "neutral" responses to procurement questions suggesting that many staff do not have contact with procurement, or do not personally procure goods and services.

- User comments back up the interpretation that the high "neutral" scores are due to lack of experience in procurement, rather than feeling ambivalent about the service.
- There were many positive comments about the quality of advice provided from the procurement team, however users recognise that they are a very small team and overstretched so are sometimes difficult to get hold of.
- Some respondents were not aware of the existence of the Strategic Procurement team, but this may be as their role would not necessitate procurement duties.
- Many users were felt that the Travel booking team did not always secure best value for money.
- FABS - users commented on the complexity and time consuming nature of adding new suppliers, and that this has resulted in delayed payments.

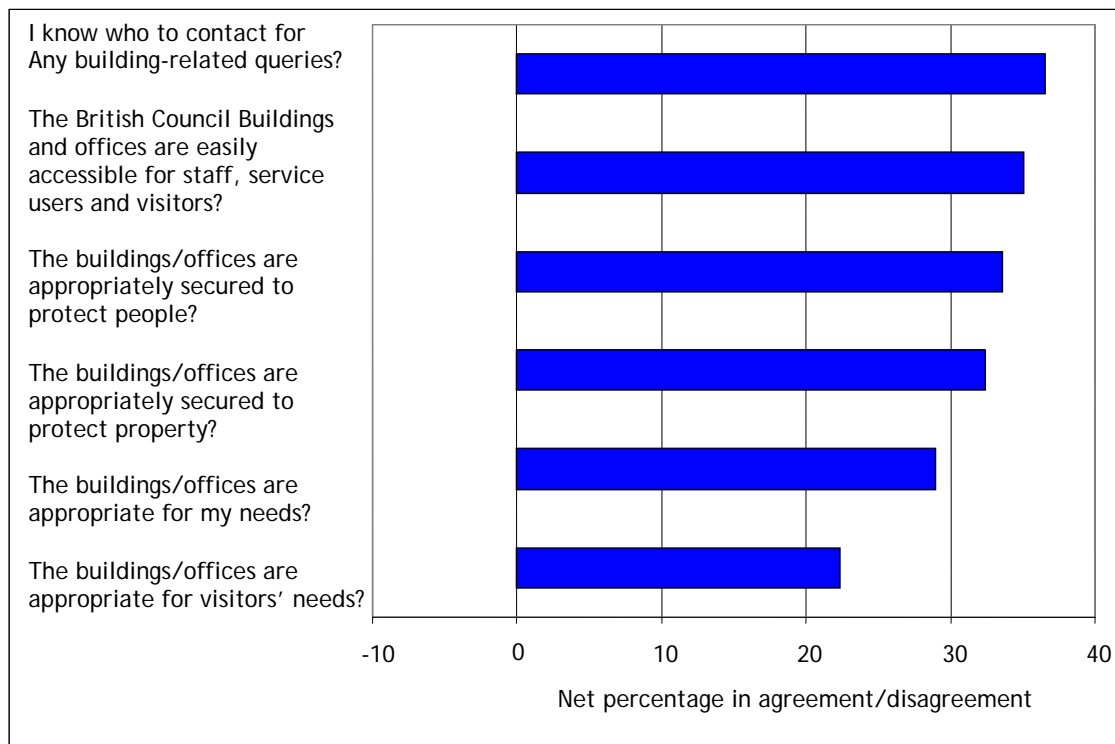
[The Strategic Procurement Team are] A small but useful team that provide an effective combination of support and enforcement

I do not think our corporate travel service providers give good value for money. They will not routinely quote for low cost airlines, which I use most of the time, and by using the internet I can usually find cheaper deals...

The process for ordering and paying is not clear and it is quite difficult to know whom to contact, which has caused some delays

The Strategic Procurement team is too under-resourced to be able to assist all those who need advice and direction for procurement of goods and services

Estates: To what extent do you agree that:



Additional information

Council staff reported a wide range of experiences, indicating that the Council has a diverse estate. The UK was the only region where over 50 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the statements.

- A number of respondents felt that some buildings in the overseas estate were not able to be accessed by disabled staff or visitors. Users also wanted to see the increased adoption of environmental policies.

- Office space is intensively used, and in some cases seen as too “tight”.
- Building moves and refurbishments are improving the quality of accommodation, however there were concerns that the move to open plan offices had reduced productivity, and that people were seated too close together in many buildings.
- Given the global spread of the Council’s network, security concerns were prevalent among staff comments. While security levels were seen as high, some staff were concerned that this could impact on its image and accessibility.

Customer access [and] customer services...are necessarily constrained in our offices in order to meet essential security requirements

Having just moved to new premises, our premises meet our requirements very well

I think that costs spent on office refurbishment do not always represent value for money. For example... a large amount is being spent on refurbishing an office, which no longer has a public access area and is in a rented property

Effort needs to be made to make buildings and systems within the buildings environmentally more efficient

Many of our buildings are inappropriate for people with disabilities; even those with lifts aren't often wide enough for wheelchair users for example