

Research Paper

An evaluation of the Acas in-depth advisory service

Ref: 04/10

2010

Derek Mitchell and Wendy Mitchell (Alpha Research Ltd)

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ISBN 978-0-9565931-1-5

An evaluation of the Acas in-depth advisory service – Report

BY

DEREK MITCHELL AND WENDY MITCHELL, ALPHA RESEARCH LTD

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Key Messages

The Acas in-depth advisory service is very clearly held in high regard by its customers. Not only is the advice provided both welcomed and useful, use of this service has led to a greater appreciation of the Acas offering and use of other Acas services.

Many users of the service are repeat customers, often from the private sector and/or working in human resources departments. New customers are usually coming in via the Acas Helpline¹.

A significant minority are using the services of other agencies for advice as well as Acas, usually lawyers or professional or trade bodies.

There was almost consensus that the quality of advice and the advisers were high, on all dimensions tested. *This was irrespective of delivery mode.* However, amongst face-to-face customers, face-to-face advice was clearly preferred, and they often instigated the meetings rather than the advisers. Although there were not significant differences by delivery mode in terms of actions taken or perceived impacts, those who met the advisers gave higher overall satisfaction ratings on average and saw in-person communication as more useful, particularly for longer, more detailed or complex conversations, or where group discussion or collective problem solving is required or documents need to be perused. They believe they are more likely to use the service again as a result of receiving advice in person. A significant minority claimed that they would have gone elsewhere if face-to-face advice was not available.

Around six in ten of all customers surveyed had introduced, reviewed or changed policies, procedures or areas of practice, or intended to, directly as a result of the advice received from Acas. Others thought that such changes might happen in the future.

The advice was regularly seen to have a positive impact on relations between managers and employees (around half of all organisations surveyed); on measurable performance indicators such as staff satisfaction in staff surveys and absence levels (around a fifth) and on organisational performance measures such as productivity or efficiency, or meeting objectives or targets, (around a quarter).

Overall satisfaction was very high on average (a mean score of 6.22 out of 7 given), usually due to advice perceived to be clear, useful, actionable or appropriate, or the proficiency of the advisers. If opinion had changed of Acas since using the service, it was nearly always in a positive direction, often fuelled by a new understanding of the breadth of the Acas offering.

The few criticisms were generally reserved for accessibility issues such as speed of response, especially via the Acas Helpline.

Nearly all said that they would use the service again, and three in ten had already done so. One in seven had gone on to use other, paid-for services since the advice, of which around half attributed this directly to the Acas advice that they received.

¹ The Acas Helpline provides clear, confidential and impartial advice to employers, employees and third parties to assist in resolving issues in the workplace.

Executive summary

Profile of users of the Acas in-depth advisory service²

- More than half of the 316 customers of the in-depth advisory service who were interviewed were employed within the human resources function, with most of the remainder in senior management roles such as directors or board members.
- About half of the customers worked in private sector organisations, with the rest split between public sector and third sector organisations. Four industries accounted for more than half of the customers interviewed: Manufacturing; Community, Personal and Social Services; Public Administration; and Health and Social Work.
- Around a quarter of organisations seeking advice had less than 50 employees - less than three in ten organisations had more than 1000. Most had a human resources department.
- Seven in ten customers interviewed said that they or their organisation had been in touch with Acas before regarding other matters. Over half said that the in-depth advisory service had been used before and more than a third had been using it for more than three years. Around a quarter had dealt with the same Acas adviser before.

Reason for contacting Acas

- Queries were most likely to be regarding Discipline and Grievance, Redundancy, Conflict and Mediation Training, or Employment Law. These topics accounted for more than half of all the customers surveyed.
- One in twelve customers interviewed at first disagreed with the topic that had been recoded from the management information data, but it was very rare for there to be a significant discrepancy between what had been recorded on Acas management information and the customer's perception.

Routes in to the service

- Three in five Acas customers of the in-depth advisory service had *considered* using other agencies, but only one in three had actually gone on to seek advice from others, most frequently from lawyers or professional or trade bodies.
- Around half of customers interviewed accessed the in-depth advisory service via the Acas Helpline. Most of the remainder made direct contact with an adviser they had dealt with before.
- Two thirds of the customers accessing the service via the Acas Helpline recalled waiting up to 48 hours for a return call from a specialist adviser, and nearly all recalled it taking less than four days. Just seven respondents felt that the wait was unacceptably long.

² Although the service is accessed by a range of different customers, this survey focused on the experiences of employers and excluded trade union representatives unless they received advice in relation to their own organisation.

Amount of contact on the matter

- On average, customers had about four contacts with Acas' advisory services to address their query. Just under half had more than one contact, averaging around seven contacts in total.
- For those who had had more than one contact, they averaged approximately three telephone calls, one meeting and three emails exchanged.
- More than one in ten claimed to be still in active contact with the adviser at the time of the Alpha Research interview i.e. after three to ten months.
- Those who had met the adviser in person were significantly more likely still to be in touch with the adviser.

Use and comparison of different delivery modes

- Eight out of ten customers interviewed had had telephone contact with the in-depth advisory service. Half of those surveyed only had contact by telephone or email.
- Half of customers met the Acas adviser. About two thirds of these had also had telephone contact. Previous customers, those representing large organisations (1000+ employees) and those seeking advice regarding collective bargaining or employee consultation, were most likely to have face-to-face interaction.
- Amongst those who had experienced both telephone and in-person contact, half said that both modes were equally useful. However, four in ten felt that the latter was more useful, compared to just one respondent who found telephone contact more beneficial. Face-to-face contact was preferred for longer, more detailed or complex communication, for sharing documents, and for group discussions. Some found it an easier way to explain and resolve problems.
- Nearly everyone who had experiences of different modes of communication was satisfied that Acas had achieved the right balance of these different modes.
- Amongst six prompted reasons for using the service, a follow up sample of 40 face-to-face customers rated *the opportunity to receive face-to-face advice* as the third most important factor, after *Acas's reputation as an independent and unbiased source of advice* and *the reputation of Acas advisers as experts in their field*. It was seen as more important than the service being provided free of charge; the facility to receive advice at short notice; or being able to receive advice from a specific adviser.
- When asked, almost two in three of customers who received face-to-face advice ('face-to-face customers') said that they had a preference for face-to-face advice when they called, most of whom declared a 'strong' preference. Just one of these customers expressed a preference for telephone advice.
- Most of the 'face-to-face customers' asked claimed to have received no advice over the telephone. More than half said that they had requested the meeting, compared to about one in three who said that the adviser had suggested it. The reasons given for setting up face-to-face meetings were similar to the perceived advantages of face-to-face interaction mentioned above, most

- If no face-to-face advice had been available from Acas on this occasion, most of those asked who received face-to-face advice (six out of ten) would have settled for telephone advice. However, around three in ten would have sought face-to-face advice elsewhere, most commonly suggesting lawyers, Citizens Advice or a private consultancy, training company or advisory service.
- Seven out of ten of face-to-face customers asked felt that they could not have achieved the same result by dealing with the adviser by telephone or email, usually for the reasons given above regarding why this mode of delivery is preferred. In addition, face-to-face advice was also identified as a more effective platform for collective brainstorming and problem solving.
- Three quarters of face-to-face customers questioned stated that, *as a result of meeting the adviser*, they would be more likely to use the in-depth advisory service again and/or other Acas services. Two thirds of these also said that they were *much more likely* to use it again than they would have been if advised only by telephone or by email.

Perceptions of the advice received

- The vast majority of customers surveyed had positive perceptions of the advice and advisers.
- In particular, advisers were almost universally seen as professional, impartial, willing to help and allowing enough time for the customer to explain their query. Almost as many agreed that the adviser was sensitive, qualified to help, knowledgeable of relevant legislation and understood the issues facing the customer's workplace.
- While most agreed strongly, around 1 in 50 disagreed that the advice had been useful, and around 1 in 30 disagreed that the advice was practical.
- Those advised face-to-face were more likely to agree strongly on these dimensions than those advised by telephone.

Actions taken since Acas in-depth advice

- Nearly four in five respondents said that Acas had advised them or their organisation to take some form of action.
- Of those who had been advised to act, three quarters had been able to do so *fully or to a large extent*, although one in twelve had not been able to act 'at all' by the time of interview.
- Many who had not taken action said that it was too early to say if their organisation would or would not act. Others noted that the problem had dissipated or it had not been necessary (yet) to tackle it, or that decisions were in the hands of (usually more senior) colleagues where the outcome was difficult to predict.
- Seven in ten of all customers surveyed had introduced, reviewed or changed policies, procedures or areas of practice, or intended to, since receiving the Acas advice. Reviews of existing policies and procedures were most likely to have occurred.

- Around nine out of ten of actions taken were felt to be attributable to Acas advice received, at least to *a large extent*.

Impacts of Acas advice

- As a result of the Acas advice, nearly half of the customers surveyed reported an improvement in one of five *areas of relations* between managers and employees:
 - Most commonly, communication was felt to be improved (one third of all respondents), with slightly lower numbers reporting a positive change in fairness of treatment of employees, trust and day to day to working relations between managers and employees, and employee morale.
- One in five respondents reported one or more improvements against four *measurable performance indicators*:
 - staff satisfaction and levels of absence were most likely to have been affected, with one in twelve reporting either or both of these. Where specified, the changes here had been in the right direction.
 - those who had introduced, reviewed or revised their policies, procedures or areas of practice as a result of the Acas advice were more likely to report these changes.
- Customers surveyed were also prompted on how the Acas advice may have impacted on three *organisational performance* measures. Nearly one in four felt that there had been an improvement in one or more of these areas, as a result of the Acas advice:
 - *Meeting objectives or targets; Quality of service or output delivered; and Productivity or efficiency* were each felt to have improved by almost one in six of all respondents.
 - Each of these three organisational performance measures were felt to have deteriorated in only a handful of cases.
- Further impacts which customers identified included an improved understanding between employers and employees, or a greater clarity or confidence in addressing certain issues.
- Organisations that had taken actions advised by Acas, or had fully resolved their issue, were consistently more likely to feel positive impacts on organisational performance, performance indicators and working relations.
 - For example, organisations that had taken actions as a result of the Acas advice were 12 percentage points more likely than those who had not acted to have noticed an improvement to any of the 'relations' indicators; six percentage points more likely to report changes to performance indicators and 11 percentage points more likely to report changes in organisational performance.
- By contrast, there were no significant differences, in terms of impacts felt, between customers who received advice face to face and those who received it by telephone.

Resolution

- Over half said that the matter had now been *fully resolved*, and a further one in five said it had been resolved *to a large extent*. One in eight said that it had *not been resolved at all*, again often because it was too early to comment. It might also not have reached a conclusion due to the complexity of the issue, or because the intention was there but concomitant priorities had taken precedence. No reference was made to the advice being inappropriate.

Overall perceptions

- Customers surveyed gave an average score of 6.22 out of 7 for overall satisfaction with the advice they received from the in-depth advisory service. Nearly half gave the maximum score, and a further third gave a score of six. In total, 93 per cent were satisfied with the advice (giving a score of five or more out of seven).
- Just three respondents gave a score of less than three out of seven.
- Those who received face-to-face advice were ten percentage points more likely than those who only received their advice by telephone to record scores of six or seven.
- High satisfaction was often fuelled by advice that was perceived to be clear, useful, actionable or appropriate. Advisers too were praised for their knowledge, professionalism, or experience. The very few negative comments centred on advice that did not quite meet the needs of the customer, or accessibility of the service (especially speed of response).
- Three in five customers surveyed felt that their opinion of Acas had not changed as a result of using the in-depth advisory service, but many of these mentioned that they had high expectations to begin with.
- Two in five noted a shift in their perceptions of Acas as a result of using the service. Where mentioned, this was nearly always an improvement in their perceptions, most commonly due to a greater appreciation of the breadth of service that Acas can offer.
 - The few negative comments here focused on service delivery and resourcing issues, such as promptness of reply.
- 97 per cent said that they would recommend the service to others and the same figure said that they would use the service again.

Suggestions and desired improvements

- About a third of respondents made suggestions for improvements to the in-depth advisory service. Most commonly these related to resourcing issues, for example in speed of response or accessibility of advisers. Raising the profile of the service was called for by some. Sometimes the comments appeared to relate to the Acas Helpline rather than the in-depth advice, or to Acas services more widely, such as widening the range of free services on offer.

Subsequent use of Acas services

- The Alpha Research interviews focused on contacts with the in-depth advisory service made between three and ten months previously. Nearly three in ten had used the Acas in-depth advisory service again regarding other matters since this period. The same proportion had used other Acas services since:
 - The other service most used was the Acas Helpline.
 - More than one in seven customers surveyed went on to use Acas paid-for services, usually open access training or bespoke training services.
- One in nine of all customers surveyed, or nearly two fifths of those who went on to use other services, said that this subsequent use of other Acas services was due *fully* or *to a large extent* to the advice they had received from Acas.

North West Recession Project

- The 13 customers interviewed who received advice relating to the recession as part of the North West Recession Project were often seeking advice regarding redundancy, and less commonly regarding salary cuts, pay freezes or shorter working hours.
- All but one had received in-depth advice in the usual ways, either by telephone, face-to-face or email.
- The quality of the advisers and advice were strongly endorsed.
- Most took some steps after the advice, most commonly to review or change policies for redundancies, and had managed to action the Acas advice in particular, albeit sometimes with initial resistance from employees or unions.
- The advice impacted successfully on the organisations' ability to instigate appropriate changes to procedures for redundancies, rather than affecting the actual volume of redundancies.
- Satisfaction was very high with the advice received, with none rating lower than five out of seven for overall satisfaction with the advice, all saying they would recommend the service and all willing to use the service again.
- The only suggestions for improvements were for a speedier service (particularly if accessing via the Acas Helpline), more free services and increased publicity.
- About a third felt that Acas had a higher profile in their area now than one year previously, whilst one only thought the opposite.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Background

Acas carries out an ongoing programme to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the services it provides; the outcomes of which feed into key performance indicators and help drive policy initiatives to improve the service offered. As part of this programme, an evaluation has been undertaken to assess the impact on organisations of the Acas in-depth advisory services.

Acas aims to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. Although perhaps better known for its dispute resolution services, Acas provides a range of advisory services designed to help reduce conflict in the workplace. The in-depth advice Acas offers is a free service delivered mainly by Acas staff in senior advisory roles over the telephone or in person, and sometimes complemented by e-mail correspondence. The service is accessed primarily on behalf of employers and offers advice on addressing employment relations issues within the workplace. It is distinct from other Acas services such as the Acas Helpline; or the more detailed work undertaken to help resolve disputes, or more preventative work such as training or consultancy.

To indicate the scale of this service, there were approximately 1500 advisory telephone calls and 850 in person meetings recorded in the Acas management information system for the 12 months to the end of September 2009.

There are two ways in which this service is usually accessed. The first is via the Acas Helpline, where the caller is referred on because they have a complex issue and/or require more in-depth or specialist advice. The other main route in is by direct re-contact of a specialist with whom a previous contact has been made.

The scope of the advice is broad but examples include: review of pay bargaining models; how to respond to a request for union recognition; implications for employer responsibilities with regard to an employee undergoing gender reassignment; and reviewing pay and grading after a period of restructuring.

The advice given could have significant impact on the organisations concerned. The provision of in-depth advice is not, however, promoted as a discrete service and the level and nature of its impact has not been previously evaluated. Some preliminary work was carried out to clarify the nature of the employment issues raised, how the service is used and how to reliably isolate this advice from other services offered.

There has also been a project recently, part funded by the North West Development Agency and run by the Acas offices in Liverpool and Manchester to provide guidance to local organisations regarding the recession. This guidance has been provided either via traditional routes such as telephone advice or meetings with Acas advisers in one's workplace, or via bespoke recession-related events, such as events held by Acas with a recession-related theme. Events included advisory 'surgeries', workshops or training events designed to guide organisations on how best to deal with the recession.

Alpha Research Ltd was commissioned by Acas to conduct a programme of research to evaluate the in-depth advisory services. A telephone survey has been undertaken by Alpha Research in the first three months of 2010, of customers who received Acas in-depth advisory services in their capacity as an employer in the six month period between May and October 2009. This period was chosen to allow sufficient time for some organisational impacts to be felt, whilst also being recent enough to allow accurate recall of the service received from Acas. The findings from this survey are discussed in subsequent chapters.

A small number of telephone interviews were also undertaken with customers of the North West recession project work. These interviews utilised a slightly different questionnaire, in order to gauge the impact of this themed advice delivered in a variety of ways. A separate chapter is included on this work.

1.2 Research Objectives

The core objectives of this research have been to determine the impact of the free in-depth advisory services delivered by Acas and how they are perceived by customers.

The research has also addressed the following:

- if and how impact and satisfaction vary by mode of service delivery
- how much the Acas free advice leads on to further Acas work (either chargeable or free services)
- how use of the service is initiated
- where else customers can go to receive such advice
- what sorts of organisations are the most prevalent users of Acas advice
- what value advisory visits and telephone calls provide for organisations

1.3 Methodology

A pre-notification letter or email was sent at the beginning of 2010, to all individuals who had received in-depth advice from Acas between May and October 2009. This detailed the rationale for the study and gave the opportunity for

opting out of the consultation. The text of this letter is provided in the technical report.

First, a pilot was undertaken in the week commencing 4th January 2010, involving ten interviews. The questionnaire was amended slightly as a result of this exercise, but not so significantly that the pilot interviewees could not be included in the final sample of interviews for analysis.

The main stage interviewing commenced on 26th January and completed on the 3rd March 2010. A further 306 interviews were undertaken at the main stage, resulting in 316 in total.

Alongside this, 13 interviews were conducted between 15th February and 10th March with customers of the North West Acas offices, who had received recession-related advice.

A breakdown of response is given in section 1.4 below.

There was some follow up work conducted to further explore perceptions of face-to-face advice compared to other modes of delivery, with 40 respondents from the first stage of interviews who were happy to be re-contacted. Short interviews were conducted in the week of 22nd March 2010.

There were also some short, follow up interviews with customers who had followed the advice by taking some action. Some, more qualitative interviews with 15 respondents from the first survey who were happy to be re-contacted were conducted, in order to elicit more of the story of their particular customer journeys. These were undertaken between 24th March and 1st April 2010.

Copies of the questionnaires - for the pilot, the main survey, the North West Recession Project survey and the two follow-up surveys – are provided in the technical report.

Responses to open questions were collected verbatim and categorised prior to analysis. Full tabulations of the results of the surveys, with subgroup analyses, have been provided under separate cover.

All findings reported as 'significant' in this report are statistically significant to a level of at least 95%.

1.4 Response rates

Table 1.1 shows the breakdown of response outcomes for all those course participants approached to take part in the survey. The base of 756 excludes those who when sent the pre-notification letter had declined to be contacted for the survey.

Table 1.1 Response analysis

	No. of contacts	
All Acas in-depth advisory records for May-October 2009 inclusive	1084	
Duplicate and incomplete records	207	
Opt-outs after pre-notification	121	
All approached by telephone by Alpha Research to take part in the survey:	756	Per cent
Did not get through to anyone (TOTAL):	136:	18:
• answer phone	95	13
• no answer	24	3
• number unobtainable/ unrecognised/ fax line	17	2
Got through but did not reach target respondent (TOTAL):	117:	15:
• respondent has left the organisation/ department	10	1
• respondent on leave (e.g. maternity/ sickness)	42	6
• target respondent unavailable at all attempts	42	6
• incorrect number – name not recognised	23	3
Spoke to target respondent but did not interview (TOTAL):	187:	24:
• refusal	84	12
• requested call back, then not available	62	9
• not able to participate	9	1
• incomplete interview	7	1
• other reason	25	3
INTERVIEWED	316	42
Total	756	100

CHAPTER TWO

Profile of respondents

2.1 Organisational profile

- More than half of those interviewed were employed within the human resources function, with most of the remainder in senior management roles.
- About half of the customers worked in private sector organisations, with the rest split between public sector and third sector organisations. Four industries accounted for more than half of the customers interviewed: Manufacturing; Community, Personal and Social Services; Public Administration; and Health and Social Work.
- Around a quarter of organisations seeking advice had less than 50 employees - less than three in ten organisations had more than 1000. Most had a human resources department.

Respondents were most commonly employed within the HR function (54 per cent) or in other management roles (25 per cent). Around one in ten (9 per cent) were board members, senior managers or directors. Other job roles included accounts officers, training co-ordinators and administrators, amongst others [Chart 2.1]. About two in three (64 per cent) were female.

The majority of respondents (53 per cent) were employed in the private sector about twice as many (27 per cent) as employed in the public sector. One in five (20 per cent) worked in the non-profit, voluntary sector [Chart 2.2].

Chart 2.1 Job role

Base: All respondents (316)

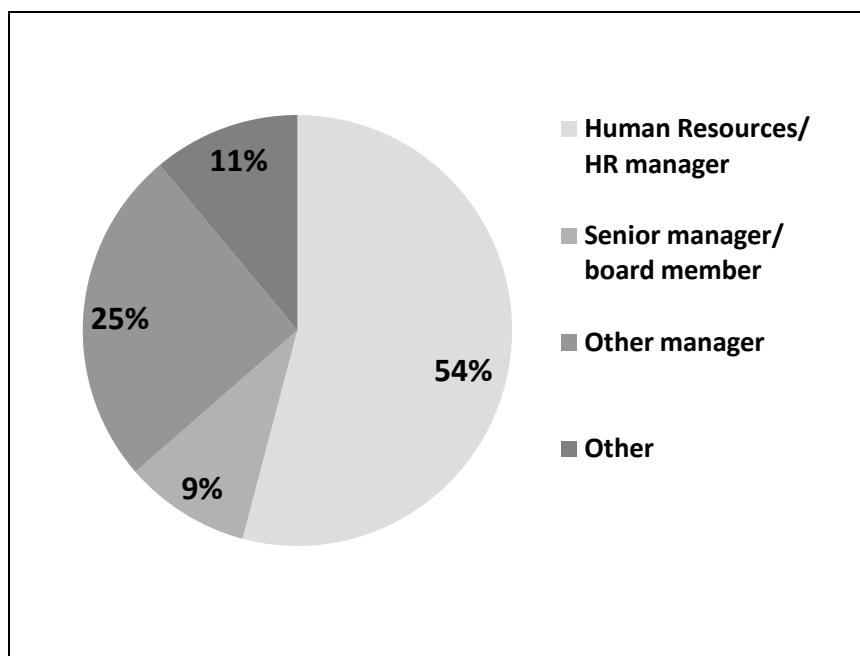
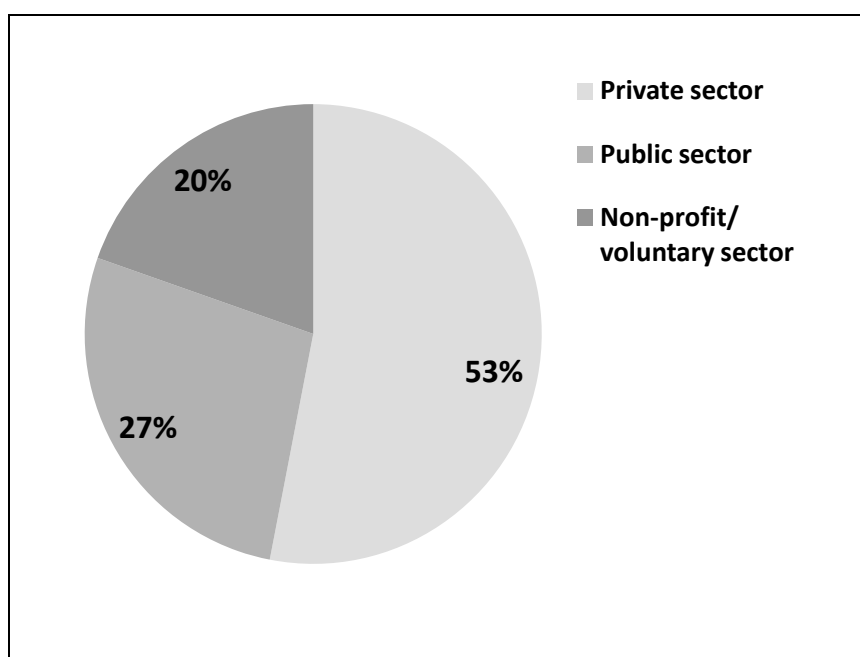


Chart 2.2 Employment sector

Base: All respondents (316)



More than half of the respondents came from one of four industries, namely manufacturing (17 per cent); community, personal and social services (16 per cent); public administration (14 per cent); and health and social work (11 per cent) [Table 2.1].

Table 2.1 Industry classification

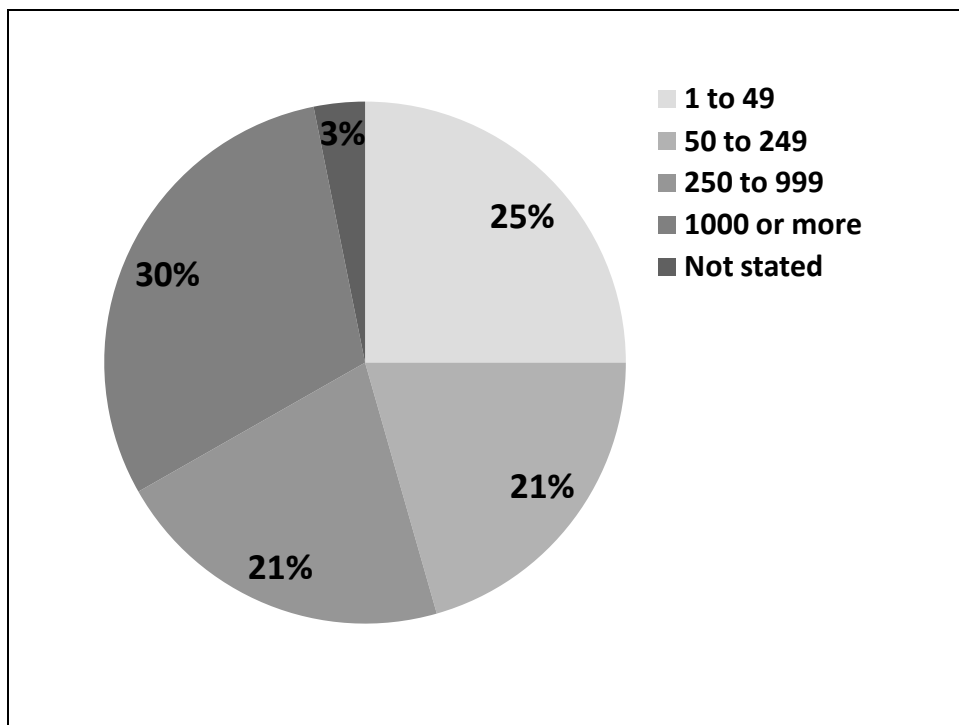
Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Manufacturing	53	17
Community, social and personal services	52	16
Public administration	45	14
Health and social work	36	11
Education	29	9
Financial and other administration	27	9
Wholesale and retail	17	5
Construction	16	5
Transport, storage and communication	14	4
Electricity, water and gas supply	8	3
Agriculture	5	2
Hotels and restaurants	5	2
Other industries	9	3

Nearly seven in ten respondents reported less than 50 employees (39 per cent) or 50 to 249 employees (30 per cent) in their workplace or on site. In terms of overall organisation size, one quarter (25 per cent) worked for organisations with less than 50 employees. Around one in five (21 per cent) worked for organisations with 50-249 employees and a similar proportion (21 per cent) worked for organisations with 250-999 employees. Three in ten worked for organisations with 1000 or more employees [Chart 2.3].

Chart 2.3 Organisational size

Base: All respondents (316)



More than seven in ten respondents (72 per cent) worked in an organisation with an internal Human Resources or Personnel department which dealt with personnel issues.

2.2 Use of Acas in-depth advisory services

More than one third (37 per cent) of the respondents had been Acas in-depth advisory service customers for at least three years. This compared to about one in six (17 per cent) who had been using the service for less than six months at the point of interview [Table 2.2].

Table 2.2 Length of relationship with Acas in-depth advisory services

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Less than six months	53	17
Six months to one year	92	29
One to three years	53	17
More than three years	118	37

The following chapters explore customers' perceptions of their previous use of (Chapter 3) and routes in (Chapter 6) to the in-depth advisory service in more detail, as well as their perceptions of the reason for contact (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER THREE

Previous dealings with Acas

3.1 Previous dealings with Acas

Seven out of ten (70 per cent) of those surveyed claimed that they or their organisation had been **in touch with Acas regarding other matters**, prior to their contact with the in-depth advisory service on this occasion. Those respondents working in an HR role were more likely than those in other roles to have had previous dealings with Acas (80 per cent).

More than half (54 per cent) claimed that they or their organisation had **previously used the Acas in-depth advisory service**, with 46 per cent claiming that they themselves had used the service previously, and a similar proportion (43 per cent) claiming that their organisation had used the service in the past. Again, those respondents working in an HR role were more likely to have previous experience of the in-depth advisory service than those in other roles, almost two thirds (63 per cent) stating that they or their organisation had previously used the service.

Around a quarter of respondents (27 per cent) said that they had **previously dealt with the same adviser**, either in their current post or previously [Table 3.1].

Table 3.1 Previous dealings with Acas

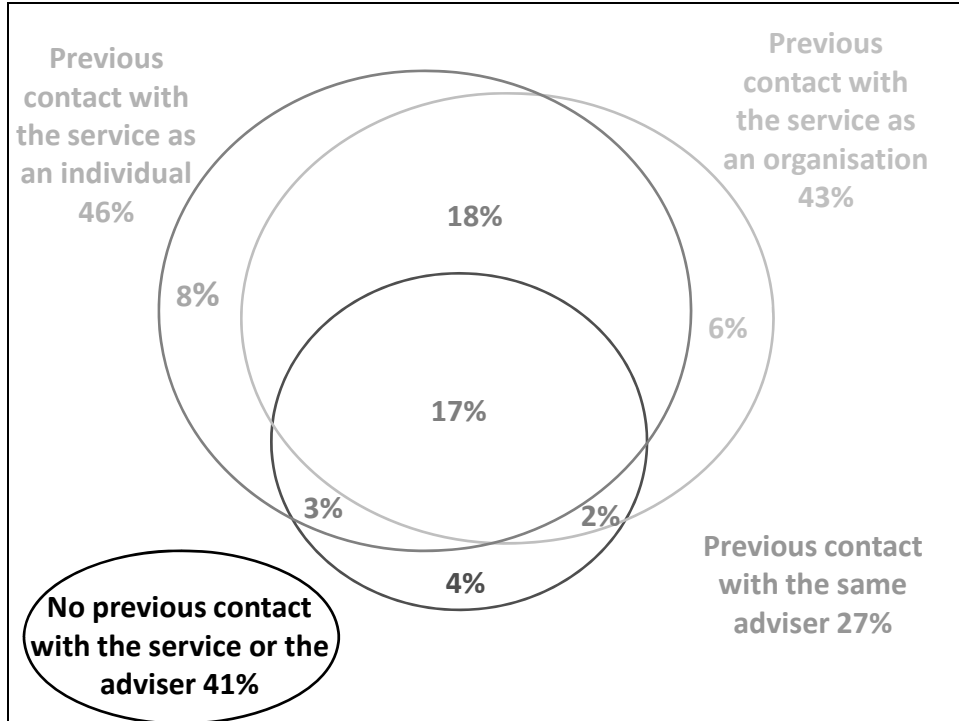
Base: All respondents (316)

	Per cent
Had any previous dealings with Acas	70
Had any previous dealings with the Acas In-depth Advisory service:	
- Either as an organisation or individual	54
- Organisation	43
- Individual	46
Had any previous dealings with the same adviser	27

Chart 3.1 summarises the type of contact respondents had previously experienced and indicates overlaps between different categories. For example, it shows that about one in six (18 per cent) respondents reported that both they and their organisation had used the service before. It is possible that the individual has used the service on behalf of their organisation before, or on behalf of an organisation they previously worked for.

Chart 3.1 Previous contact with the service/adviser

Base: All respondents (316)



CHAPTER FOUR

Use of other agencies

4.1 Other agencies considered for advice

Respondents were asked **who else they considered seeking advice from** about the issue in question. More than half (57 per cent) had considered using other sources of advice, most commonly lawyers (considered by 25 per cent) and professional and trade bodies/organisations (considered by 19 per cent). Smaller numbers had considered taking advice from trade unions (5 per cent), Citizens Advice (2 per cent), Business Link (1 per cent) and other sources such as HR and employment consultants (3 per cent), internal advisers (2 per cent), and local and regional agencies, such as Chambers of Commerce and regional development agencies (1 per cent) [Table 4.1].

Private sector organisations were significantly more likely than those in the public sector to have considered using lawyers for advice (32 per cent and 16 per cent respectively).

Table 4.1 Other sources of advice considered

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
ANY OTHER SOURCE CONSIDERED	179	57
Lawyers	80	25
Professional / trade body/ organisation	59	19
Trade union	16	5
Citizens Advice	7	2
Business Link	4	1
Accountants	1	<0.5
Others, including:	39	12
HR/ employment consultants/ advisers	8	3
Internal advisers / HR/ personnel dept.	6	2
Local and regional agencies	4	1

4.2 Other sources of advice used

Around a third of respondents (35 per cent) stated that they had **sought advice on the issue in question from sources other than Acas**. Most commonly, advice was sought from lawyers (15 per cent) and professional and trade

bodies/organisations (11 per cent). Smaller numbers had taken advice from trade unions (3 per cent), Business Link (1 per cent), Citizens Advice (1 per cent) and other sources such as HR and employment consultants (2 per cent), internal advisers (1 per cent), and local and regional agencies (1 per cent) [Table 4.2].

Table 4.2 Other sources of advice used

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
ANY OTHER SOURCE USED	111	35
Lawyers	46	15
Professional / trade body/ organisation	35	11
Trade union	11	3
Business Link	3	1
Citizens Advice	2	1
Accountants	1	<0.5
Others, including:	25	8
HR/ employment consultants/ advisers	6	2
Internal advisers / HR/ personnel dept.	4	1
Local and regional agencies	2	1

CHAPTER FIVE

Reason for contact

5.1 Nature of query

The management information database contains information regarding the topic of the discussion between the customer and adviser. Prior to the research, this information was re-coded on database to reduce the number of distinct 'contact topics' to 16 broad categories. The full breakdown of topics covered by the survey is shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Contact topics (re-coded on the management information data)

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Discipline and grievance	45	14
Redundancy	43	14
Conflict and mediation training	41	13
Employment law	32	10
Information and consultation	27	9
Collective bargaining and trade union issues	20	6
Bullying and harassment	18	6
Absence and stress management	16	5
Payment / grading arrangements and job evaluation	15	5
Diversity and discrimination	13	4
Change management	8	3
Performance management	8	3
Implementing flexible working arrangements	7	2
Recruitment and employing people	7	2
Managing people	4	1
TUPE	4	1
General employment relations issues	3	1
Equal pay	1	<0.5
Other	4	1

Early in the interview, the respondents were told which contact topic their discussion had been classified as, and were asked whether they felt that this was an accurate description of why they contacted Acas on the occasion in question. To a large extent, the classification on the management information data database closely matched the customers' own recollections of their reason for their contacting Acas. Overall, 92 per cent of respondents felt that the contact topic accurately described their reason for contacting Acas.

CHAPTER SIX

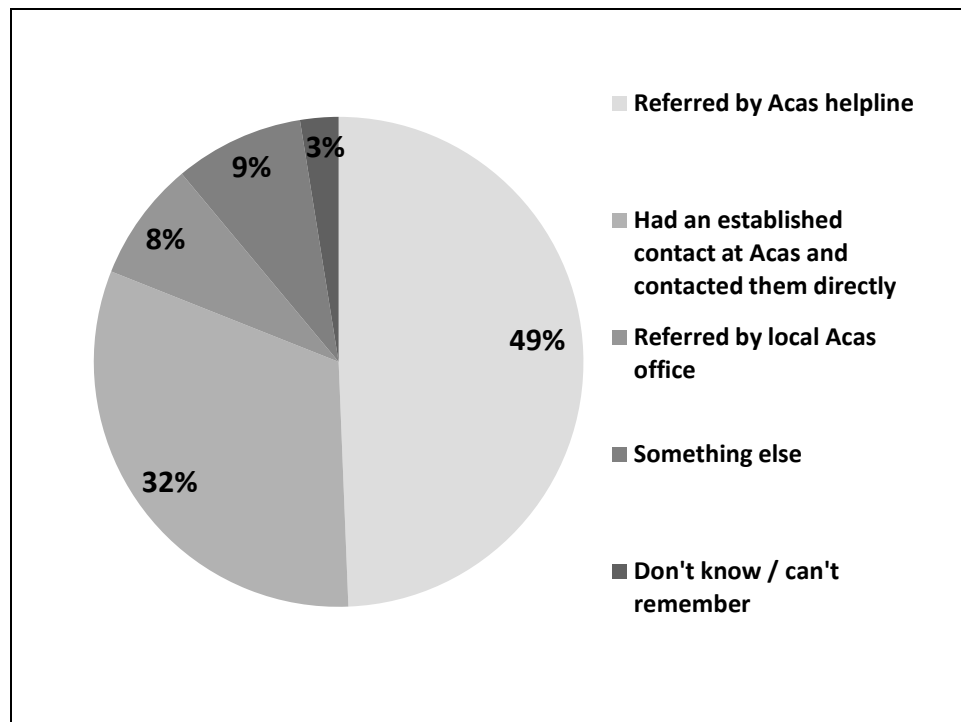
Routes followed to access the service

6.1 Routes followed to access the service

Around half of those surveyed (49 per cent) were referred to the in-depth advisory service after first having called the **Acas Helpline**. Around one in three (32 per cent) said that they already had an **established contact at Acas whom they contacted directly**. A small number were referred by their **local Acas office** (8 per cent) and a few accessed the service via other routes, such as via the internet or through contact with an adviser at a training session or network meeting. Others were contacted by Acas after Acas was approached by another party [Chart 6.1].

Chart 6.1 Route followed to access the service

Base: All respondents (316)



The following groups were significantly more likely to have contacted an adviser directly, rather than being referred via the Acas Helpline:

- Established customers (those who claimed to have been **using the service for at least a year**) (45 per cent).
- **Public sector** organisations (44 per cent)

- **Those with more complex cases³ (39 per cent)**

It seems logical that longer term customers would be more likely to have previously formed a relationship with an adviser.

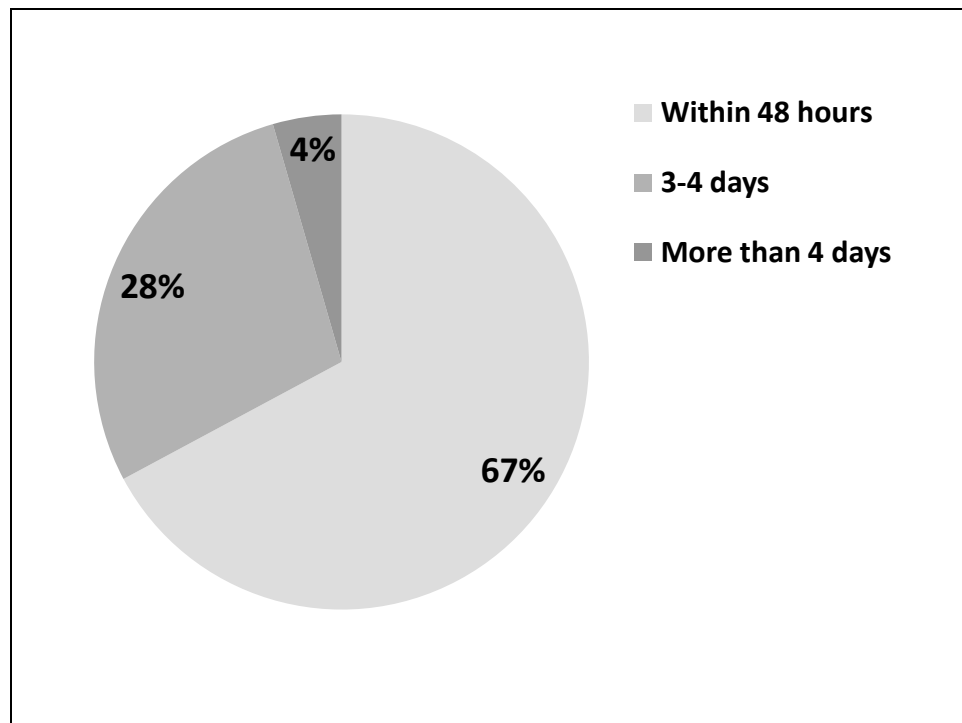
Public sector organisations were more likely to have more complex matters to resolve, so it is unclear whether sector or case complexity, or both, are factors here.

6.2 Acas Helpline referrals

Those respondents that accessed the in-depth advisory service via a call to the Acas Helpline were asked how long it was before they were contacted by an adviser following their initial call. Around one in seven respondents (14 per cent) could not recall how long it was before their call was returned. Of the rest, two thirds (67 per cent) claimed that a specialist called them back within 48 hours, and the large majority (96 per cent) had their call returned within 4 days [Chart 6.2].

Chart 6.2 Speed of response

Base: All referred by the Acas Helpline who gave a response (134)



³ More complex cases were defined as involving at least three contacts with Acas and/or contact of at least one month. 131 respondents met one or both of these criteria.

The majority (95 per cent) of those who contacted the service via the Acas Helpline considered that the **period they waited for the Acas adviser to call them back was acceptable**. Just seven respondents (5 per cent of those who were referred by the Acas Helpline) felt that the wait was unacceptably long. Of these, one was contacted within 48 hours, four within 3-4 days, one after more than 4 days, and one claimed that their call was not returned at all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Amount of contact on this matter

7.1 Number of instances of contact on this matter

Around half of those surveyed (51 per cent) claimed that they only spoke with the adviser on the matter in question **on a single occasion**. The other half (49 per cent) said that there were **additional meetings, telephone calls or email exchanges** with Acas advisers on the same issue either before the contact in question or since.

Including those customers who only had dealings with an adviser on a single occasion regarding the particular issue surveyed, the mean average number of contacts was 4.1. Amongst those who had multiple contacts, the average number of contacts was:

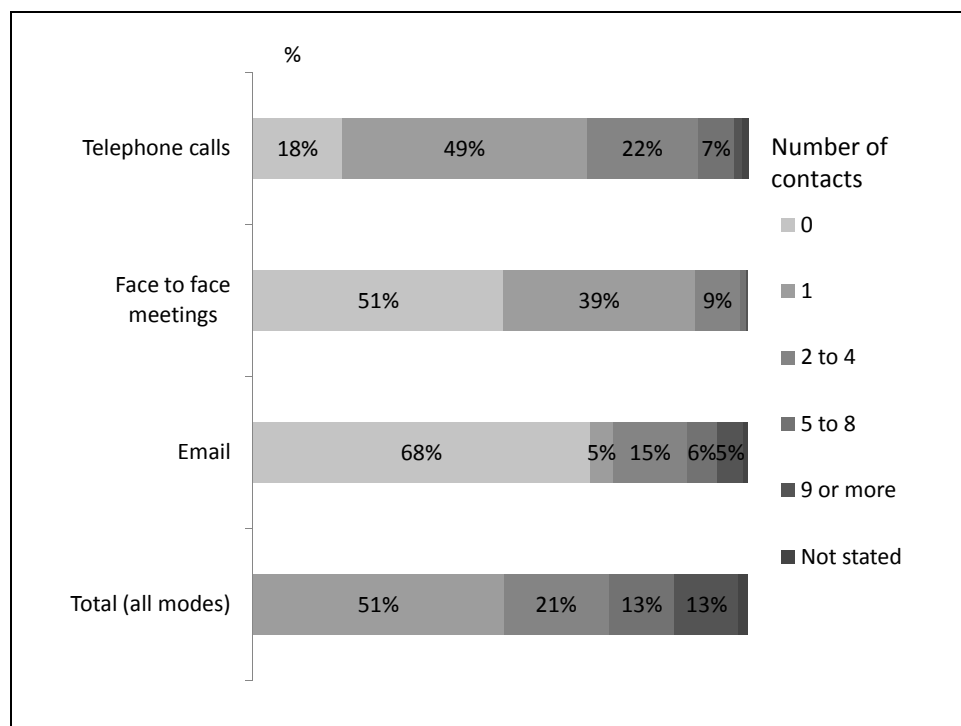
- 3.0 advisory calls (i.e. calls with a specialist adviser on the issue in question)
- 1.2 face-to-face meetings with an adviser
- 3.2 emails exchanged with an adviser
- **7.3 contacts in total**

Chart 7.1 summarises the amount of contact with the service, based on all respondents.

Further analysis of the relative use of different modes of delivery (face-to-face, telephone, email) is detailed in Section 8 “Mode of delivery”.

Chart 7.1 Number of instances of contact

Base: All respondents (316)



7.2 Length of contact

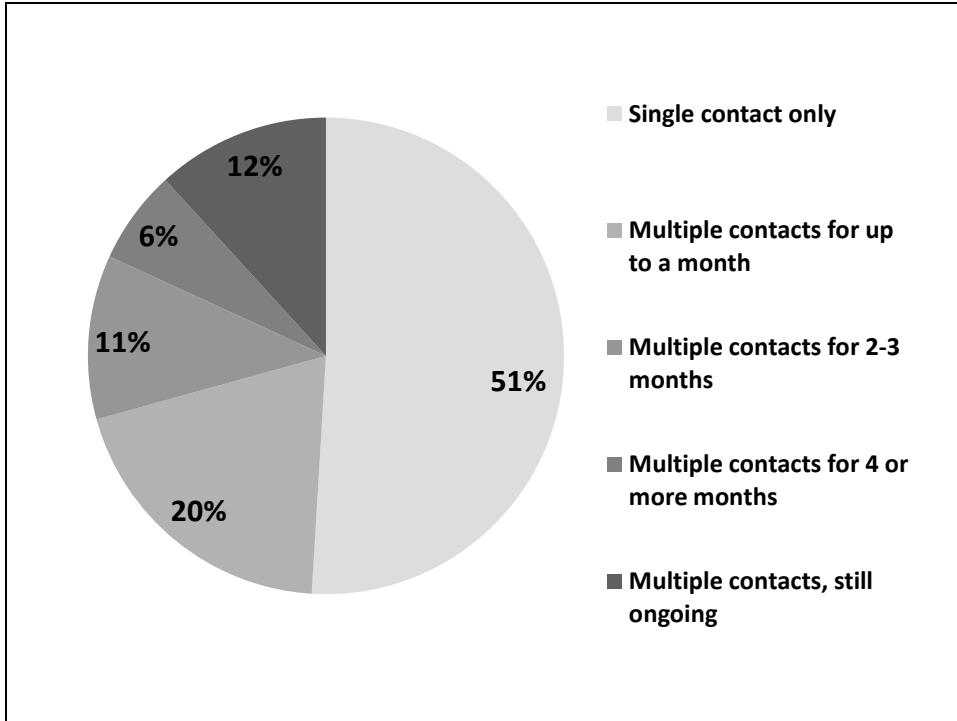
More than one in ten respondents (11 per cent) claimed that they were **still in active contact** with the adviser on the matter in question at the time of their interview (i.e. between 3 and 10 months after their contact with the service). On average, these respondents claimed to have been in contact with the adviser for 5.6 months (mean).

Those who had met with the adviser face to face were significantly more likely than those who had received only telephone advice to be still in active contact with the adviser (22 per cent and 2 per cent respectively).

Amongst those that claimed to have had multiple contacts with the service on the matter in question, but were no longer in contact with the adviser on this matter (38 per cent of the total sample), more than half had been in contact for no more than a month and the majority for no more than three months. On average, these respondents claimed to have been in contact with the adviser on the issue in question for 2.4 months (mean) [Chart 7.2].

Chart 7.2 Length of contact with the service

Base: All respondents (316)



CHAPTER EIGHT

Mode of delivery

8.1 Use of different delivery modes

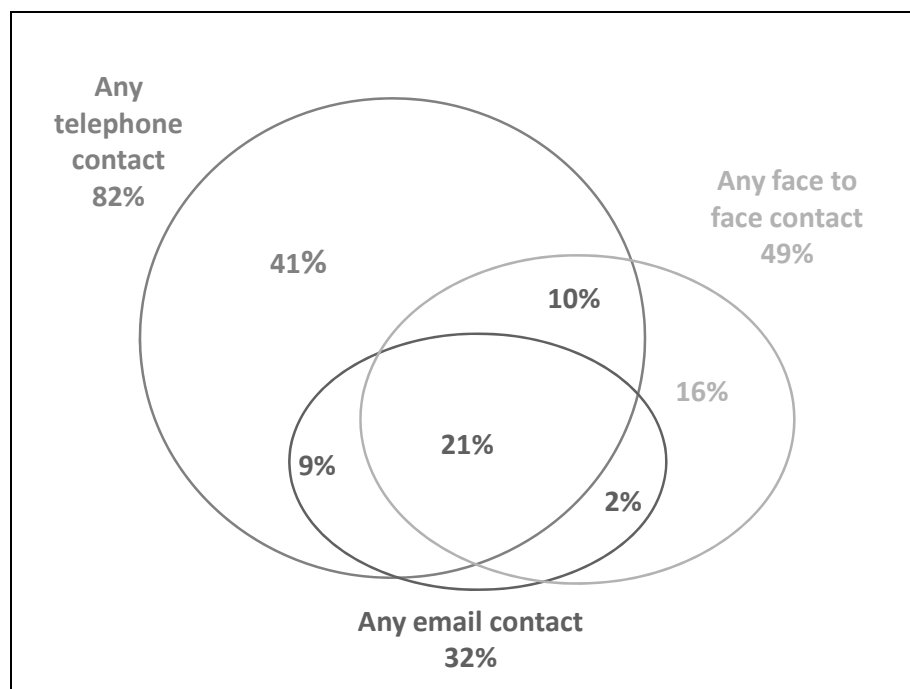
The most common mode of contact with the in-depth advisory service was by telephone. Overall, more than eight in ten respondents (82 per cent) had contact with the service by telephone. Around half of those surveyed (51 per cent) dealt with the in-depth advisory service *only* by telephone and/or email, while a similar proportion (49 per cent) received advice face to face.

Many of those that received face-to-face advice also had contact with the service on the same issue by telephone (63 per cent of those that had face-to-face contact) and/or by email (46 per cent of those that had face-to-face contact).

Chart 8.1 shows the overall pattern and overlap of use of different delivery modes in the total sample. For example, we can see that around one in five (21 per cent) of the sample had had contact via all three modes.

Chart 8.1 Modes of delivery

Base: All respondents (316)



There was no very clear pattern to the type or types of situation where face-to-face advice was provided. Customers that received face-to-face advice included organisations of all type and sizes; from all regions; those with long standing relationships with Acas as well as new customers; and organisations presenting a wide range of different issues. However, a few groups were more likely than average to have received face-to-face advice. These included:

- Organisations with **1000+ employees** (57 per cent received face-to-face advice, compared with 38 per cent of those with fewer than 50 employees).
- Those contacting the service regarding **collective bargaining or employee consultation** (62 per cent).

We will see later that face-to-face advice is preferred for more complex discussion or where a number of people need to be involved, so it may be that larger organisations or repeat customers have a greater need for this sort of advice. Clearly, where employee consultation is the topic of interest, it seems more likely that a number of parties would be involved.

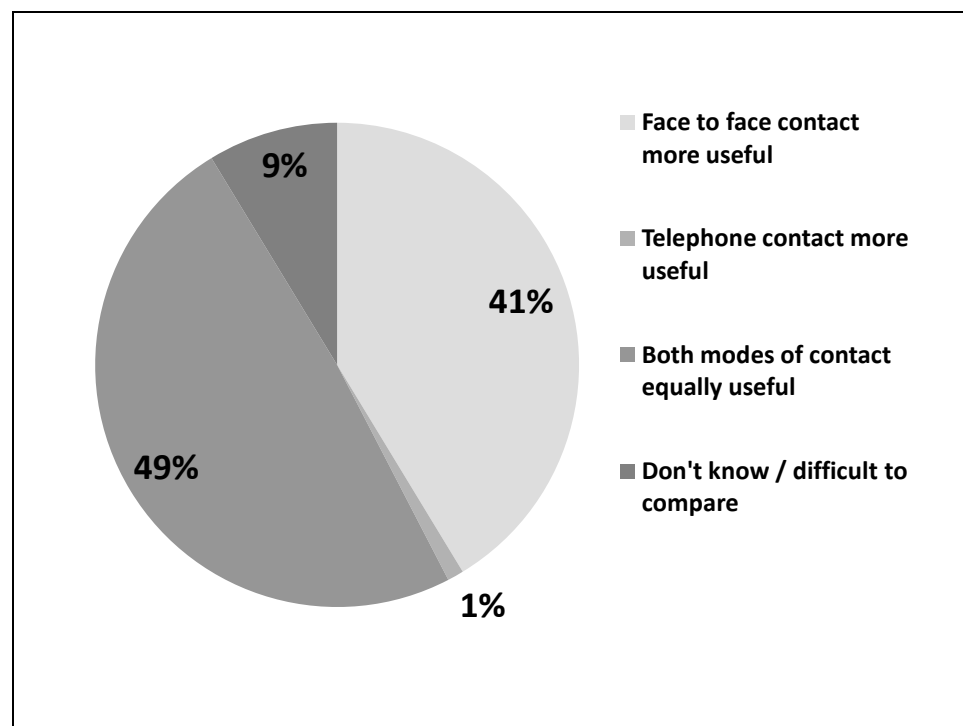
8.2 Opinions on the use of different delivery modes on this occasion

Those respondents that had had contact both face to face and by telephone with the in-depth advisory service on the issue in question were asked to assess how the two modes of delivery compared.

When prompted, around half (49 per cent) of those that had contact with the service both face to face and by telephone felt that both modes were **equally useful**. However, around four in ten (41 per cent) felt that the **face-to-face contact was more useful than the telephone contact**. Just one respondent (1 per cent) considered the telephone contact to have been more useful than the face-to-face contact with the adviser [Chart 8.2].

Chart 8.2 Comparison of delivery modes

Base: All respondents (92)



In some cases, face-to-face contact was seen as more useful as it **allowed lengthier, more detailed and in-depth discussions** than would be possible by telephone:

"More in-depth and thorough."

"Covered a lot more ground."

"You can have an in-depth talk in person."

"It gave me the opportunity to make notes and to query explanations in depth."

Others found that **communication was better** face to face:

"I found it easier to explain the problems."

"It's easier to iron out issues face to face rather than on email or by telephone."

"Being on site, [the adviser] could see how we work and the individuals. More difficult to explain on the phone."

For others, face-to-face contact was considered necessary in order to **involve others** in the discussions:

"It let us involve a third party – the trade union."

"Originally we needed them to meet with management."

"We had a team meeting with the adviser so it was very constructive."

"There was a group of us needing the information."

A small number considered face-to-face contact more useful as it allowed them to **share documentation** with the adviser:

"Face to face was needed to share documents, so it was necessary."

"I had documents which I was able to show the adviser."

Overall, the vast majority of those that had multiple contacts with the service on the issue in question were happy with the mode(s) of delivery employed by advisers. 96 per cent of those questioned felt that **the balance was right** between email, telephone and in-person communication. Three respondents would have preferred more telephone contact, two would have preferred more email contact and just one would have preferred more in-person contact.

CHAPTER NINE

Face-to-face advice

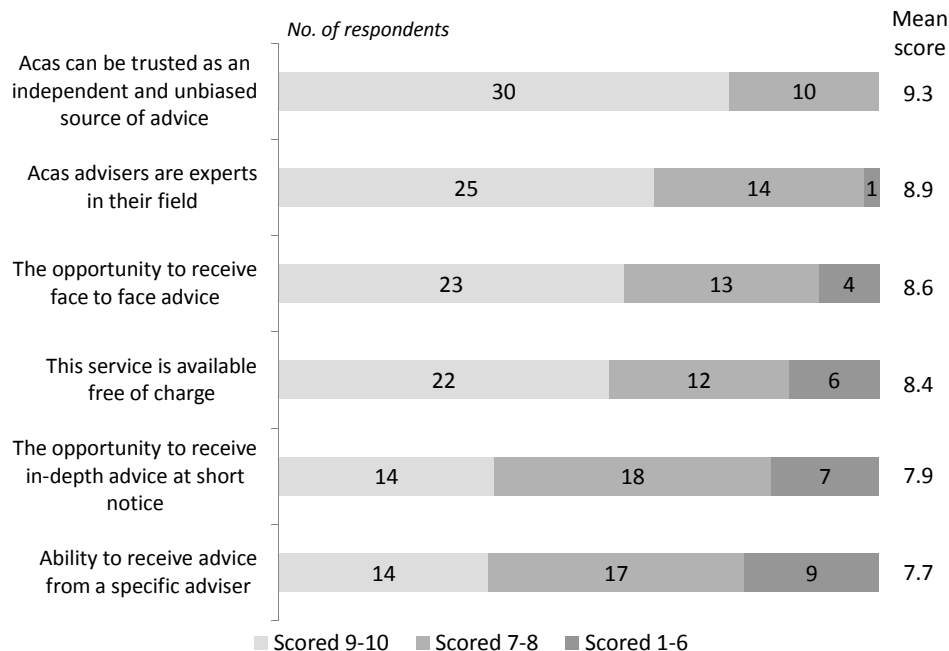
NB The findings detailed in this chapter are based on the responses of 40 respondents that had received advice face to face and were recontacted for a follow-up survey regarding their experience of this mode of delivery.

9.1 Perceived importance of the face-to-face offering

Respondents were asked to indicate the **relative importance of the opportunity to receive advice face to face** in their decision to use Acas's in-depth advisory service on the occasion in question. In order to ascertain this, respondents were asked to rate each of a number of aspects of the service on a scale of 1 to 10, where a score of 10 indicated that this feature of the service was *crucially important* in their decision to use the service on the occasion in question, and a score of 1 indicated that the feature was *not important at all*. The results are summarised in Chart 9.1 below.

Chart 9.1 Relative importance of different aspects of the service offering

Base: All respondents contacted for the follow-up survey (40)



The features of the service judged overall to have had most influence on the customers' decision to use the service were Acas's reputation as an *independent and unbiased source of advice* and the reputation of their advisers as *experts in their field*. However, the opportunity to receive *face-to-face advice* was rated third most important overall of the six features listed amongst those questioned, with more than half of these respondents giving a rating of 9 or 10 out of 10, and just four of the 40 respondents questioned giving a rating below 7 for this aspect of the service. On average, the opportunity to receive advice face to face was rated more important than the fact that the service is *free of charge*, the ability to receive advice *at short notice* or the ability to receive advice *from a specific adviser*.

9.2 Preference for face-to-face advice

Respondents were asked whether, when they first contacted the in-depth advisory service about the issue in question, they had a preference between receiving advice face to face or by telephone. Almost two thirds said that they had had a **preference for face-to-face advice** when they called, with more than half claiming a strong preference for advice delivered face to face. The majority of the rest said they had no preference regarding delivery method when they first contacted the service, and just one of the 40 respondents recontacted said that when they first contacted the service they had had a preference for receiving advice by telephone [Table 9.1].

Table 9.1 Initial preference regarding delivery mode

Base: All respondents recontacted for the follow-up survey (40)

	No. of respondents
A strong preference for face-to-face advice	23
A slight preference for face-to-face advice	3
No preference	12
A slight preference for advice by telephone	0
A strong preference for advice by telephone	1
Don't know / can't remember	1

9.3 The decision to provide face-to-face advice

The decision to provide face-to-face advice was commonly made at the **request of the customer**. More than half of those questioned in the follow-up survey said that they specifically requested a meeting with the adviser, while only around one in three indicated that the adviser had suggested they meet. In a small

number of cases it was felt that there was no choice in the matter, due to the need to involve a number of people or to fill in forms [Table 9.2].

Table 9.2 How it was decided to deliver advice face to face

Base: All respondents recontacted for the follow-up survey (40)

	No. of respondents
Customer requested a meeting	21
Adviser suggested a meeting	13
Other (e.g. dictated by circumstances)	4
Don't know / can't remember	2

More than half of those who received face-to-face advice and were recontacted for the follow up survey claimed that they **received no advice on the issue by telephone**, but that they called the service simply to set up an appointment to meet with the adviser face to face [Table 9.3].

Table 9.3 Whether also received advice by telephone

Base: All respondents recontacted for the follow-up survey (40)

	No. of respondents
Just set up appointment to meet	21
Received advice by telephone	16
Had no telephone contact with the adviser	1
Don't know / can't remember	2

Respondents were asked why it was suggested that they should meet with the adviser, rather than receive advice over the telephone.

In many cases, the **need to include others** in the discussions was cited as a primary reason for delivering the advice face to face (14 mentions):

"There were other people involved that the adviser had to meet as a group. It couldn't have been done any other way."

"We needed them to come and talk to our workforce. It was the right way to deal with our employees on a touchy subject."

"Because there was more than one person needing the advice and there would obviously be questions."

Many simply expressed a **preference for dealing with issues face to face** (11 mentions):

"It's much, much better to have face-to-face contact. You can see if the person is genuinely interested and willing to listen, rather than using the phone which is impersonal."

"I prefer face to face really as it's more personal and you have a greater understanding of the issues when you deal direct with someone."

"I felt I had to see someone face to face. I had so many questions to ask and I needed that personal contact with someone. That was extremely important for me."

Others cited the **complexity and detailed nature of the issue** as a reason for requiring face-to-face advice (9 mentions):

"Because of the detail we needed to go through."

"The issues were complex and detailed."

"I think I realised it was going to be quite complicated dealing with this on the phone."

In a small number of cases, face-to-face contact was felt necessary due to the **need to share documents or fill in forms** (4 mentions):

"No choice as forms had to be filled in."

"I needed to show paperwork."

In a few cases the respondent implied that the meeting was not only to discuss the issue at hand, but was designed to build or continue an **ongoing relationship** with Acas which may lead to further interactions (4 mentions). We have seen in earlier chapters that customers who had used the same adviser before were more likely to seek face-to-face contact on subsequent occasions:

"I was keen to make a relationship with the advisers for future advice for the organisation."

"It's an ongoing relationship. They come to us every 6 months approximately."

"We are a new company and this was offered. They decided we could benefit from a more consultancy role."

9.4 Alternatives to face-to-face advice

Those respondents who were recontacted for the follow-up survey were also asked **what they would have done had it not been possible to arrange to meet with the Acas adviser** to discuss the issue face to face. Six out of ten said that they would have sought advice from the Acas adviser by telephone if they had been unable to arrange to meet them. Around three in ten would have sought face-to-face advice elsewhere, while more than one in ten was unsure or felt there was no other option open to them [Table 9.4].

Table 9.4 Course of action that would have been taken if face-to-face contact not possible

Base: All respondents recontacted for the follow-up survey (40)

	No. of respondents
Sought advice by phone/email from the Acas Adviser	24
Sought face-to-face advice from another source	11
Sought advice by phone/email from another Source	0
Done something else	4
Don't know	5

Of the 12 respondents who claimed that they would have sought advice elsewhere if Acas had not offered face-to-face advice, the following alternative sources were suggested:

- Lawyers (4 mentions)
- Citizens Advice (2 mentions)
- Private consultancy, training company or advisory service (2 mentions)
- Alternative mediation service (1 mention)
- Someone in a similar situation in another organisation (1 mentions)
- Unsure (3 mentions)

9.5 Perceived benefits of face-to-face advice

The majority of those who had received face-to-face advice and were questioned in the follow up survey felt that they **could not have achieved the same result** by dealing with the adviser on the telephone and/or via email. Seven out of ten felt they would not have achieved the same result, with many (four out of ten) claiming they would *definitely* not have achieved the same result. However,

three in ten felt it at least probable that they could have achieved the same end result without the need for face-to-face contact.

Those who felt that they could not have achieved the same result without meeting the adviser face to face were asked why they felt this way, and what if anything they felt could not have been achieved if the advice had been provided only by telephone and/or email.

Customers cited similar reasons for the benefits of face-to-face interaction as they had for why it was chosen (see 9.3). In many cases, the need to **include a number of people** in the discussions was seen as precluding a telephone approach (11 mentions).

Several respondents felt that it would have been impossible to cover the necessary level of **detail and complexity** without meeting face to face (9 mentions):

“Too complex. It would have been much harder and taken much longer to achieve what we did via the phone.”

“I spent two hours with the adviser. It was really thorough and very detailed. That couldn’t have been achieved without a meeting.”

A number also commented that the face-to-face format was more **interactive** (7 mentions) enabling more **creativity** and **problem solving**:

“It needed an exchange of views, questions and advice from and to different people. More was achieved by the visit and exchange of views – better interaction.”

“Because several people were involved. We managed to find a way to move forward. This couldn’t have been done on the phone or by email.”

“Because there were lots of issues. Things were not straight forward and I felt I had to be in front of someone. One question’s answer would lead to another issue and so on.”

A few cited the need to **share documents** and other visual material (5 mentions):

“The adviser was well equipped with books and documentation ... he showed me pages from manuals, and quotes I needed to see.”

“He was able to bring materials with him that were looked at at the meeting. It’s easier to have things talked through rather than in an email.”

“We were looking at a bespoke training programme and we needed to look at diagrams to explain our working process.”

9.6 Other impacts of providing face-to-face advice

The majority of customers who met with an adviser claimed that they are now more likely to use the in-depth advisory service again and more likely to use other services from Acas in the future than they would have been if the advice had been provided only by telephone and/or email.

Three quarters of those questioned in the follow-up survey stated that as a result of having met the Acas adviser they would be **more likely to use the in-depth advisory service again**, two thirds describing themselves as *much more likely* to use the service again than they would have been had they received advice only by telephone and/or email. None of those questioned felt that as a result of meeting the adviser they were now *less* likely to use the service in the future.

It would appear that, for some customers at least, the provision of face-to-face advice is a highly valued part of the offering.

Similarly, three quarters of those questioned felt that as a result of having met the Acas adviser they would be **more likely to use other Acas services** than they would have been had they received advice only by telephone and/or email. Again, no respondents considered the meeting to have had an adverse effect on their propensity to use other Acas services.

CHAPTER TEN

Perceptions of the advice received

10.1 Perceptions of the advice and the adviser

Returning now to the main survey, all respondents were asked to give their opinions of the adviser they spoke to and the advice they were given. They were presented with a number of statements about the adviser/advice and asked to say to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each one. The results are summarised in Chart 10.1.

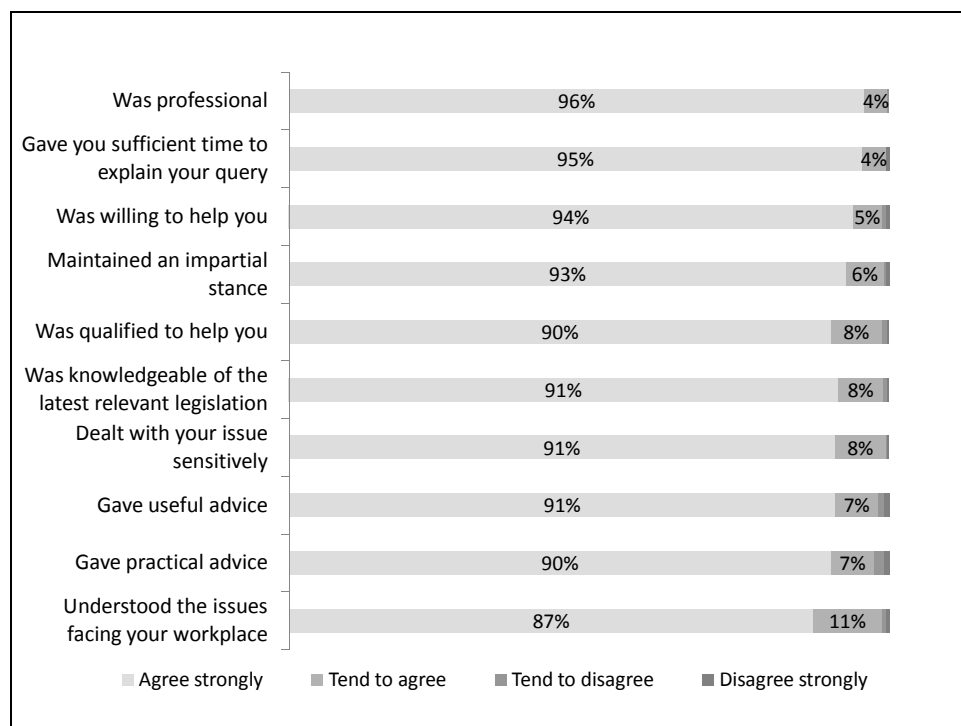
Overall, perceptions of the adviser and the advice offered were very positive. More than nine in ten respondents who expressed an opinion agreed with each of the statements presented, the vast majority agreed strongly, and no more than eight respondents (3 per cent) disagreed with any one of the statements.

Advisers were almost universally seen as *professional, impartial, and willing to help*, and the vast majority of respondents felt that the adviser allowed them *sufficient time to explain their query*. There was also general agreement that the adviser was *qualified to help, understood the issues facing the workplace, dealt with the issue sensitively and was knowledgeable of the latest relevant legislation*. No more than four respondents (one per cent) disagreed with each of these statements.

While around nine in ten of those expressing an opinion agreed strongly that the adviser gave *useful and practical advice*, a small number disagreed with these statements (2 per cent and 3 per cent respectively). In some cases no advice had been given, while others were unhappy with the advice they received.

Chart 10.1 Perceptions of the advice/adviser

Base: All respondents giving a response (291-313)



Those who received advice **face to face** also tended to have a more positive view than those who received advice only by telephone. Again, they were more inclined to agree strongly with many of the statements, particularly that the adviser was *willing to help*, *knowledgeable of the latest relevant legislation* and *qualified to help*.

Those with more complex cases were significantly more likely to strongly agree that the adviser was willing to help (97 per cent) or qualified to help (93 per cent).

The common theme here seems to be that if a customer has more interaction or received a more personal service from Acas then there is a greater opportunity for the Acas adviser to be appreciated. It could also be the other way round – a highly regarded adviser may be more in demand for more in-depth or complex advice.

Actions taken since Acas in-depth advice

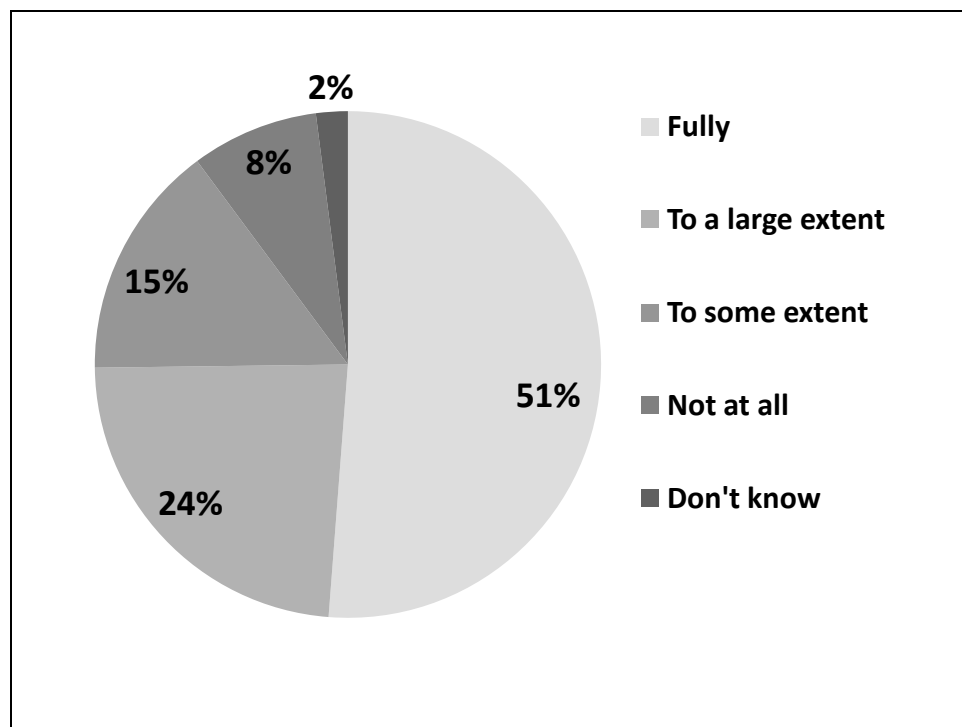
11.1 Receiving and heeding Acas advice for action

Nearly four in five respondents (78 per cent) said that **Acas advised or suggested some actions that the organisation could take** to resolve their issue.

Of those who received advice which included possible actions, three quarters (75 per cent) **had been able to action the advice** 'fully' or 'to a large extent' [Chart 11.1]. However, one in twelve organisations (eight per cent) had not been able to action the advice 'at all' by the time of interview.

Chart 11.1 Extent to which the organisation had been able to action the advice received

Base: All where action was advised (246)



Senior managers were more likely to say that recommended actions had been taken 'fully' or 'to a large extent' (90 per cent), as were those who claimed that

relations were very good between managers and employees at the point of interview (85 per cent). However, those who had not used the in-depth advisory services before were more likely to say that it had not been possible 'at all' to take the actions suggested (13 per cent).

It may be that the more senior and established customers have been able to move matters forward more quickly than others.

The most common **reason given for not taking suggested measures or only actioning them 'to some extent'**, was that work was still ongoing or that it was too early to say (12 respondents). Six respondents reported that the problem had since dissipated or it had not been necessary to implement the actions, whilst the same number said that the advice had been passed to senior colleagues who had not yet taken the actions, or had chosen not to.

"Complex situation, it takes time to move from one position to the other. The failure in fully implementing the advice was not a reflection on the adviser."

"Both parties dropped the trial/case, so it wasn't necessary to action any of the recommendations."

"The information was to give to the Vice Chairman. He then decided to go down a different route."

A Customer Journey (1)

A private sector manufacturing company (100-249 employees) received advice from Acas by telephone (a single call only, accessed via the Acas Helpline) to check that they were following the correct non-discriminatory procedures:

"We do a lot of work for councils and they require us to have diversity and no discrimination. We had to ensure we were meeting the guidelines [for diversity] in the workplace."

I was not a previous customer of Acas, but they seemed to be the best people who could advise me for the queries I had. They are known to be the best."

They [showed me] how to write the best policy and then where to continue with the policy written. We've gone to employee consultation and publicised the policies on our website. Probably the hardest part was getting it to employee consultation – we've got some employees who've been here for over 30 years and change is not something they welcome."

[In terms of impact] I don't see any results so I have no idea. I wrote the policies on behalf of the MD so anything would have gone back to him and he would not then discuss it with me for reasons of confidentiality."

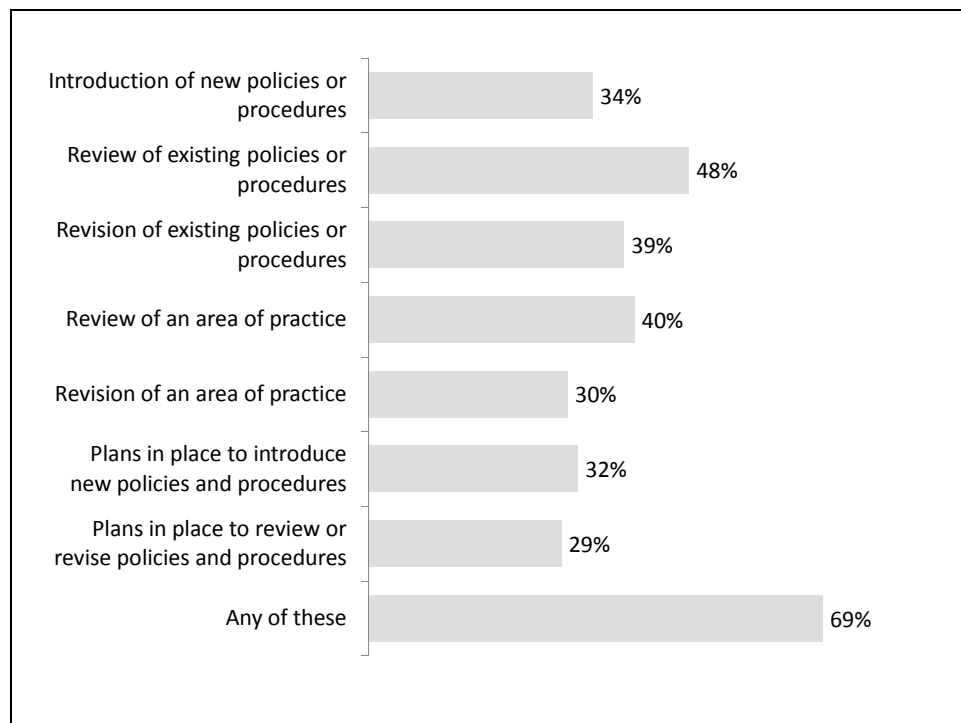
This organisation was 'extremely satisfied' with the advice given, 'strongly agreed' that it was useful and said that it would use Acas again.

11.2 Specific actions taken by organisations

The nature of the actions taken was explored further. Organisations were asked if they had **introduced, reviewed or changed policies, procedures or areas of practice, or intended to, since receiving the Acas advice**. Nearly seven in ten (69 per cent) said that they had done so or intended to take these actions, with reviews of existing policies and procedures being most prevalent (48 per cent) [Chart 11.2].

Chart 11.2 Specific actions taken by organisations

Base: All respondents (316)



Those with more complex cases were more likely to have introduced new policies or procedures (55 per cent), or reviewed (49 per cent) or revised (37 per cent) an area of practice. It may be that complex cases were more likely to require such changes.

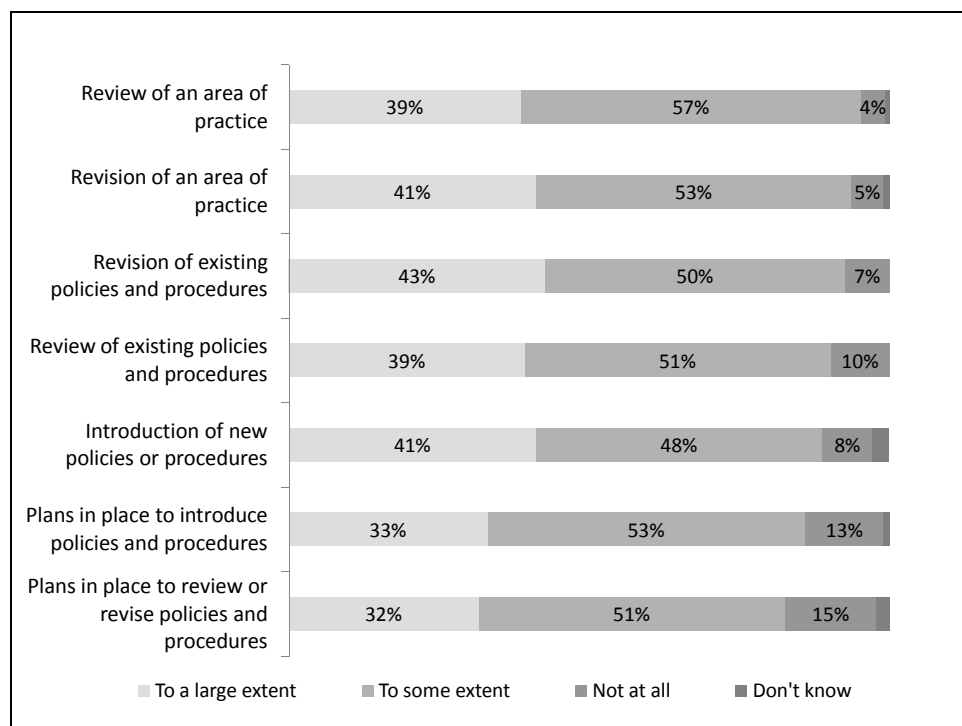
Longer standing customers of the in-depth advisory service were more likely to have taken, or had the intention to take, some action, with nearly three quarters (74 per cent) saying that this was the case, compared to about half (51 per cent) of newer customers (i.e. those had been receiving in-depth advisory services for less than six months). Similarly, those who were seeking advice for the first time were less likely (62 per cent) to have taken, or have the intention of taking, some action.

Smaller organisations, especially those without Human Resources departments, were slightly more likely to have actually made revisions to policy or procedures. It may be easier to make such changes more quickly in smaller organisations.

Respondents were asked **how much the actions that they had taken had been due to the advice they had received from Acas**. Chart 11.3 indicates that this was the case 'to a large extent' or 'to some extent' for around nine out of ten actions taken. Of those who had taken action, 90 per cent of respondents said that one or more of the actions they took was due at least in part to the advice they received.

Chart 11.3 Extent to which actions were due to Acas advice

Base: All where this action was taken (92-153)



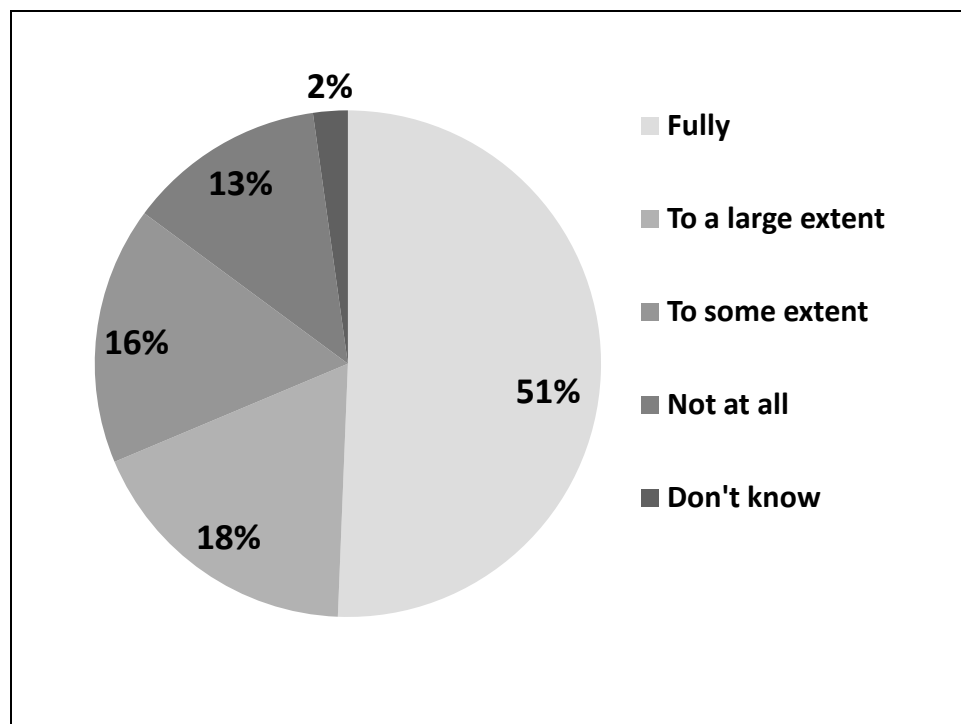
Subgroups varied little in how much actions could be attributed to the Acas advice. However, it is perhaps notable that those who went on to 'fully resolve' their issue were slightly more likely to say that the actions they took were due 'to a large extent' to the course of advice received from Acas. Smaller organisations too were more likely to say that this had been the case.

11.3 Resolution

Respondents were asked **to what extent they felt the issue that they had raised with Acas had been resolved**. Just over half (51 per cent) said that it had been resolved 'fully', and a further third said it had been resolved to a 'large extent' (18 per cent) or 'to some extent' (16 per cent). However, one in eight (13 per cent) said it had not been resolved at all [CHART 11.4].

Chart 11.4 Extent to which the issue has been resolved

Base: All respondents (316)



Consistent with actions taken, smaller organisations were significantly more likely to say that the matter had been resolved fully or to a large extent (78 per cent). Those working in financial and administrative industries (85 per cent) and/or in the private sector (77 per cent) were also more likely to report full or virtual resolution. By contrast, those in the non-profit or voluntary sectors (58 per cent), the public sector (60 per cent) and/or public administration (56 per cent), were less likely than average to report full or almost full resolution. However, public sector organisations were more likely (34 per cent) to have complex cases (as defined by length of contact and number of contacts) than private sector organisations (23 per cent).

Ninety two respondents felt the matter had not been resolved, or had been resolved 'to some extent' only. Thirty eight of these (41 per cent) observed that it was too early to say whether the issue had been or would be resolved in full. A further twelve cited time pressures or an intention to take action in the future [TABLE 11.1].

"We put in place a six month review period. Ends in two weeks - depends how the meeting goes."

"Deep rooted personality issues - may never be resolved."

Table 11.1 Reasons for matter not being resolved at least 'to a large extent'

Base: All respondents who said matter had not been resolved, or resolved 'to some extent' (92)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Too early to say/ still ongoing	38	41
Complex situation/ personality issues/ not possible to resolve	6	7
Intend to take action in the future	6	7
Time pressures	6	7
Employee(s) not interested in implementing suggested solutions	4	4
Management not interested in implementing solutions	4	4
Change in operation or circumstances of the workplace	3	3
Situation improved/ problem went away without taking action	3	3
Other reason	22	24

CHAPTER TWELVE

Impacts of Acas advice

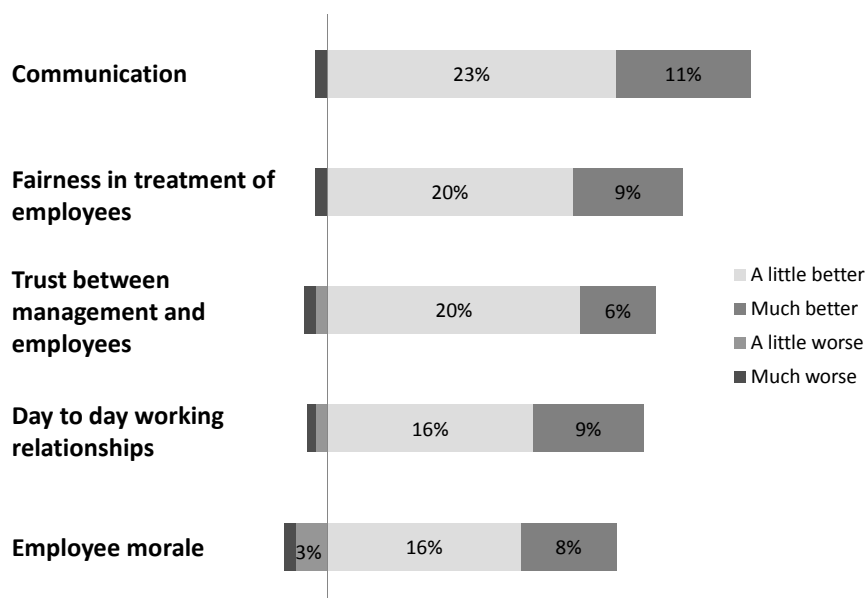
12.1 Impacts on relations between managers and employees

Respondents were asked **whether, as a result of the advice received from Acas, five aspects of relations between managers and employees had improved, worsened or not changed**. Nearly half (45 per cent) reported an improvement in one or more of these five areas.

More than one in three (34 per cent) reported an improvement ('much better' or 'a little better') in communication between managers and employees. Approximately one quarter reported improvements in day-to-day working relationships (25 per cent) and trust (26 per cent) between managers and employees, or in fair treatment (28 per cent) or morale (23 per cent) of employees [CHART 12.1].

Chart 12.1 Impacts on relations between managers and employees

Base: All respondents (316)



A Customer Journey (2)

A medium sized, third sector education organisation approached Acas via the Acas Helpline and received advice by telephone (a single telephone call only) to check that they were following the correct procedures for setting up a consultation committee:

"We always go to Acas re anything employment- or HR-related. They confirmed what we were doing was ok and talked me through everything. We implemented a group..., set up this committee and Acas said it was fine. We've now got a fully functioning working group. The advice was spot on, all our questions were answered and we were able to get everything we requested sorted out."

This organisation strongly agreed that the advice they had received had been useful and practical, and reported improvements, as a result of Acas advice, in day to day working relationships, fairness in treatment of employees, trust between management and employees, employee morale and in measured staff satisfaction levels. They were 'extremely satisfied' with the advice they received.

Those who have been customers of the Acas in-depth advisory services for more than one year were significantly more likely to report improvements on one or more of these dimensions (52 per cent) than those who had been customers for less than one year (37 per cent). Although this trend was consistent across all five elements, this finding was most in evidence in terms of improvements to communication, where two in five of the more established customers (40 per cent) perceived a positive shift compared to just over half of this proportion amongst the newer customers (21 per cent). This follows on from previous chapters which have shown that more established customers were more likely to have taken actions as a result of the Acas advice received.

Those working in financial and other administrative industries were more likely to report an improvement in one or more of these dimensions (63 per cent), whilst those from community, social and personal services were less likely to do so (37 per cent). This was consistent across all five dimensions but particularly so in day to day working relationships (56 per cent reporting an improvement as compared to 35% overall) or in communication (56 per cent also – compared to 34%) for those from financial and administrative organisations.

Where the advice was felt to have been fully or largely actioned, respondents were much more likely (57 per cent) than those who had not actioned the advice or actioned it to only some extent (33 per cent) to report improvements to one or more of these dimensions as a result of the Acas advice. Similarly, if the matter was deemed to have been fully or largely resolved, improvements were more in evidence (54 per cent reporting one or more of these five improvements) than amongst those who did not regard the matter to be fully or largely resolved (26 per cent).

Improvements in communication were more commonly felt by larger (50+ employees) organisations (47 per cent) than by smaller organisations with a Human Resources department (32 per cent) and especially by smaller organisations with no such department (9 per cent). This is perhaps surprising given that smaller organisations were more likely to report actions and changes made.

12.2 Impacts on measurable performance indicators

Respondents were also asked to consider **if and how the advice they received from Acas had impacted on certain performance indicators**. Four specific measures were enquired about: labour costs, levels of absence, staff satisfaction (as monitored in staff surveys) and staff turnover. One in five respondents (21 per cent) reported one or more of these indicators being affected by the Acas advice. Table 12.1 below indicates that staff satisfaction and absence levels were most likely to have been affected, with one in twelve respondents reporting either or both of these (9 per cent).

Table 12.1 Impacts of Acas advice on measurable performance indicators

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Impact on...		
...levels of absence	27	9
...staff satisfaction as monitored in staff surveys	27	9
...labour costs	21	7
...staff turnover	20	6
ANY of the above impacts	65	21
NONE of the above impacts	251	79

A Customer Journey (3)

A medium sized manufacturing company approached Acas via a trade union and received advice by telephone (a single call) to discuss conflicting advice they had received regarding shift work:

"The issue was we had a day shift and a night shift and wanted to close the night shift as the more expensive one to run. [However], the Engineering Employers Federation were of the opinion that we'd have to pool both shifts and undertake a selection exercise. We contacted Acas as an independent and they advised us to go with the union's suggestion to do away with the night shift.

We were extremely satisfied with the advice because it reinforced the common sense approach...it was nice to get the rubber stamp from an independent body.

There has not been one objection and no repercussions. We lost 40 people but safeguarded the company. It's not nice to take people's jobs off them."

The organisation strongly agreed that the advice had been useful and practical. They did not report impacts on levels of absence, staff turnover labour costs or staff satisfaction, but did note improvements in communication, day to day working relationships and trust between management and employees, as well as improvements in fairness in treatment of employees, employer morale. They were extremely satisfied with the advice received.

The numbers experiencing these impacts were very small, so subgroup comparisons are limited. However, it is notable that more than a third of those who reported changes in labour costs or staff turnover had sought Acas advice regarding redundancies and layoffs.

There was a correlation between actions taken and impact on performance indicators. Those survey respondents who had introduced, reviewed or revised their policies, procedures or areas of practice were more likely than average to observe changes in one or more of these areas (27 per cent), and more likely to report changes in levels of absence (11-16 per cent) or in staff satisfaction (12-14 per cent).

There were also a couple of industries where results deviated significantly from the mean here. Health and social work organisations were more likely to report impacts on absence levels (22 per cent, 8 of 36 respondents working in this industry); whilst manufacturing organisations were more likely to report changes to their labour costs (17 per cent, nine of 53 respondents in this industry).

Where indicated, absence levels had declined, most commonly due to a reduction sickness absence (five respondents) or through fostering a better working environment or better morale (three respondents).

"Better efforts being made by managers - improved working environment".

"Less absence. Staff concerns are being answered much quicker."

"General feel across the organisation, better communication, less absence."

In 21 of the 26 instances where staff satisfaction had changed, the respondent reported an improvement on this dimension. Three reported a negative impact.

Where labour costs had been affected, in 5 of the 21 cases redundancies were specifically mentioned as the reason for this. In five further cases labour costs were identified only as 'reduced'. Increases in pay or bonuses (four cases) or other increases in cost (three cases) were also cited.

In the 20 cases where staff turnover had been affected by the Acas advice, in the majority of cases there had been 'redundancies' (six cases), the departure of an employee (four) or the dismissal of an employee (two). However, seven of these 20 had called Acas in the first instance regarding redundancies, so this suggests that Acas, in some instances at least, is advising on best practice in relation to handling redundancies rather than advising whether redundancies should be made. In six cases redundancies were avoided (two cases) or staff did not leave (two), or there had been another positive impact.

12.3 Other impacts felt by organisation

Respondents were asked to comment on whether they had experienced any **other impacts in their organisation other than those prompted areas regarding performance indicators or relations between employees and managers.**

About three in ten (29 per cent) identified further impacts, and a further one in ten (10 per cent) said that it was too early to say.

Those working in third sector (non profit/ voluntary sector) organisations were significantly more likely to say that there had been further impacts (40 per cent), as were those who were still in active contact with the adviser (46 per cent).

Again, taking some actions was more likely to lead to other impacts too, with 34 per cent observing perceived additional impacts on their organisation.

Impacts described were positive in nature. About a quarter (24 per cent) of respondents identified an enhanced understanding or clarity for employers and/or employees. Often the impacts identified related to less quantifiable measures, such as improved confidence or morale. Mentions were also made of areas already suggested, such as improved communications or relations, or changes to policies and procedures [Table 12.2]:

Table 12.2 Other impacts felt by organisations resulting from Acas advice

Base: All respondents identifying further impacts (92)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Improved understanding of employment issues/ for employer/ for employees	22	24
Improved communication	11	12
Improved confidence in decision-making	9	10
Improved working relationships/ industrial relations	9	10
Led to further training	7	8
Feel more positive/ comfortable about where to turn to for help	6	7
New policies introduced/ policies updated	5	5
Policies formalised/ tightened up	4	4
Improved staff morale	3	3
New procedures introduced/ procedures updated	3	3
Policies/ procedures are adhered to better	3	3
Improved image of organisation	2	2
New contracts introduced/ changes made to contracts	2	2
Other	25	27

"Management and staff are much more aware of current legislation. This information has now spilled over into the community."

"Helped in terms of another policy change that we're working through - opened up dialogue."

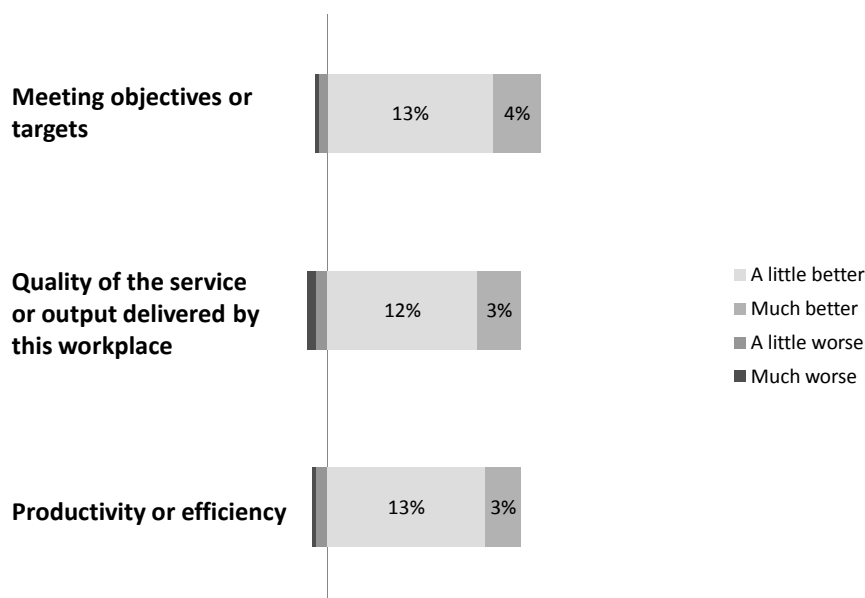
"Committee / management thinking about getting more training - being mooted as a result of Acas input - new policies etc. They realise it might be worth their while getting trained up too."

12.4 Impact on organisational performance

Respondents were asked to consider **if the advice had affected their organisation in general, in terms of performance**. Nearly one in four (23 per cent) felt that there had been an improvement in one or more performance measures (in quality of service or output and/or productivity/ efficiency and/or or in meeting objectives or targets), *as a result of the Acas advice* [Chart 12.2]. No more than a handful (between three and five respondents each of these measures) felt that performance had deteriorated.

Chart 12.2 Impacts on organisational performance

Base: All respondents (316)



A Customer Journey (4)

A large public sector organisation contacted an established contact at Acas directly by telephone (a single call only) on how to make changes to employment conditions which would impact on 3000+ employees:

"We were trying to work through how we could take it forward and, if a case reached tribunal, the strength of our position in this regard....Acas were very helpful, very thorough, listened well and made good suggestions which helped me clarify our position. They were able to tell us how to deal with trade unions as we'd run into difficulties, and how we wanted to go forward.

We did go through with the programme but [in response to Acas advice] had to improve the new pay and conditions, and terms. In the end staff signed up to the new conditions and as a result of the implementation we have been put up for an award – a council award for 'staff achievement' in the category 'value for money'.

In general, we had no difficulty with the advice but we did have resistance from staff but in the end they saw the sense of accepting the programme and the programme has now settled down

very well. It gave us the confidence to go forward in the way we wanted to and in line with other agencies."

The organisation regarded the advice they received as useful and practical. They also noted significant improvements in fairness of treatment of employees as well as improvements in employee morale and in day to day working relationships and trust between managers and employees, as a result of the Acas advice. Overall, they were 'extremely satisfied', because Acas were 'very helpful, very thorough, listened well and gave good suggestions'.

Certain groups were more likely to report one or more of these improvements. This included the small organisations (with up to 49 employees) with a human resources department, who were 17 per cent more likely (40 per cent) to report an improvement. By contrast, medium-sized organisations (50-249 employees) that did not have a HR department were one of the least likely groups to report such improvements (14 per cent). We have previously seen that smaller organisations were more likely to have taken actions by the time of the interview, so it seems that this may have contributed to the greater likelihood of impacts.

Organisations in the health and social work field were also more likely to report organisational performance improvements as a result of the Acas advice, with nearly two in five (39 per cent) reporting one or more of these. This follows on from the finding that levels of absence in this sector were significantly more likely to have declined.

Again, those who were advised to take some actions were significantly more likely to report a positive change here (26 per cent, compared from nine per cent of those who had not been advised to take actions) and those who had gone on to adopt new or revised policies, procedures or areas of practice were particularly likely to report them (34 per cent). Similarly, whether the issues had been resolved also made a difference – those where the issue had been resolved at least 'to a large extent' were more likely (29 per cent) to report improved performance of the organisation.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

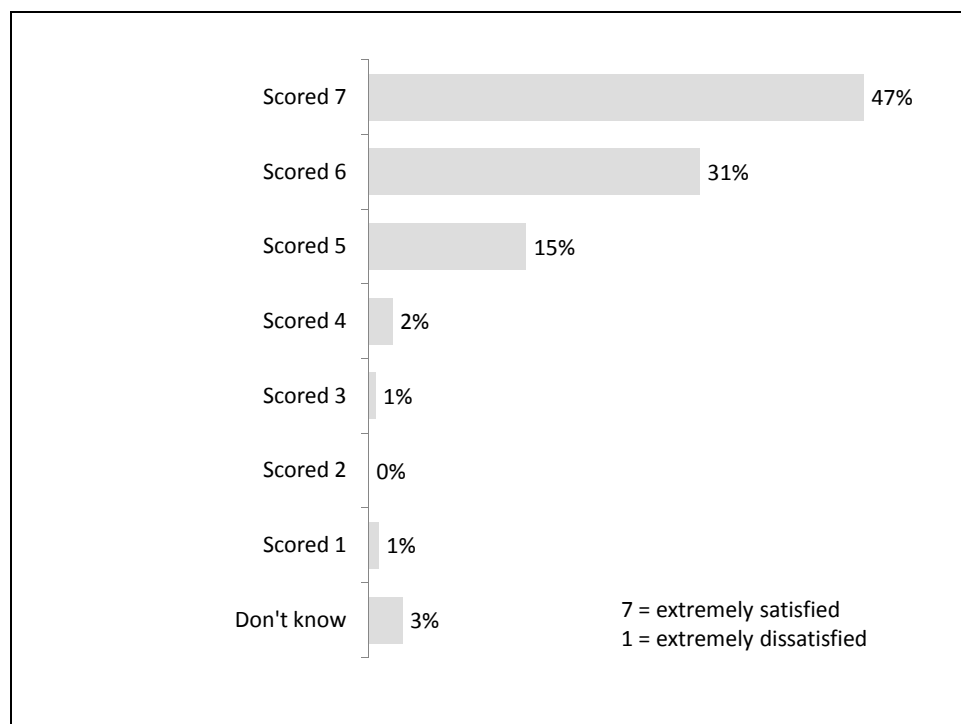
Overall perceptions of the Acas in-depth advisory service

13.1 Overall satisfaction

Respondents gave a rating between one and seven for how satisfied they were with the advice they received, where one was extremely dissatisfied and seven was extremely satisfied. In total, 93 per cent were satisfied with the advice (giving a score of five or more out of seven). The average score was 6.22, with nearly half of the sample (47 per cent) giving a maximum score of seven out of seven. Ten respondents (4 per cent) gave a score of four or less out of seven, of which three gave the lowest score of one [Chart 13.1].

Chart 13.1 Overall satisfaction

Base: All respondents (316)



Certain groups were significantly more likely to record the highest scores of six or seven. 78 per cent of the overall sample fell in to this category, yet those who received advice in person from the adviser were more likely to (83 per cent) than those who received advice only by telephone (73 per cent).

Those using the service for between one and three years were most likely (87 per cent) to give the highest ratings, compared to the newest customers (up to one year), who were least likely to give the highest ratings (68 per cent). This is consistent with other data reported which shows previous customers to be more likely to be satisfied with the advice and more likely to have taken actions.

Those working in Human Resources departments were more likely to give a high score of six or seven (82 per cent), but they were also more likely to be previous customers.

Those who revised, reviewed or introduced policies, procedures or areas of practice as a result of the Acas advice were more likely to record high satisfaction scores here (of six or seven out of seven), with 84 per cent doing so, compared to 69 per cent of those who hadn't taken such measures. Again, we have already seen that taking actions tends to lead to more or greater impacts.

Intuitively, there was also a correlation between resolution of the matter and satisfaction, with 88 per cent of those 'fully resolving' the matter scoring six or seven out of seven for satisfaction, compared to 60 per cent of those who said the matter had not been resolved 'at all'.

Reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction were probed. **Many of the explanations given for high satisfaction related to the quality of the advice** – how clear, useful, actionable or appropriate it was. There was also significant praise for the advisers, most commonly for their demonstration of their professionalism (18), knowledge (16 comments), or their experience (6) [Table 13.1].

"[Acas] manage to convey difficult subjects, very clear on our objectives and very knowledgeable and practical advice given, not too much detail."

"Flexible, helpful, supportive advice which worked for us."

"It reinforced what we already thought; they understood the business we are in."

Around one in ten respondents (11 per cent) made **negative comments** [Table 13.1]. Most commonly the advice was not felt to meet the customer's requirements (7 comments), either because it not seen as a practical solution to the problem presented, or because it was simply not the solution which the customer had hoped to receive:

"I think the advice was sound but the practicality of implementing the advice given a fairly hostile relationship between the company and the trade unions at that time was making it very hard to implement it."

Others complained that **communication** with Acas was sometimes slow, and advisers were not always easy to contact:

"Sometimes communication was a little slow."

"Good professional people, but they may not always be available for contacting."

Other negative comments (each mentioned by fewer than five respondents) are detailed in Table 13.1 below.

Table 13.1 Reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with Acas advice

Base: All respondents (313)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Positive comments:		
Clear/ straightforward/ explicit advice	54	17
Positive comments about adviser	50	16
Good/ sound advice	30	10
Helpful/ useful advice	29	9
Confirmed our beliefs	26	8
Appropriate/ relevant advice	25	8
Practical/ actionable/ pragmatic advice	25	8
Impartial/ unbiased/ objective/ fair advice	19	6
Gave us what we needed	16	5
Allowed us to move forward/ act	15	5
Effective/ solved the problem	12	4
Excellent service/ valuable service	12	4
Quick response/ good availability/ prompt	12	4
Concise	11	4
Correct/ accurate advice	10	3
Other positive comments	72	23
Any negative comments:	34	11
Advice did not meet requirements	7	2
Slow response/ poor communication/ availability	6	2
Negative comments about the performance/ ability of the adviser	4	1
Advice too general/ vague/ not specific/ directive	3	1
Dissatisfied with additional Acas service provide as a result of the advice	2	1
Not relevant/ to the point	2	1
Lack of consistent point of contact at Acas	2	1
Not impartial/ not a balanced viewpoint	2	1
Calls not returned	2	1
Other negative comments	6	2

13.2 Change in perceptions of Acas as a result of using the in-depth advisory service

More than a third of respondents (37 per cent) said that **their perceptions of Acas had not changed since using the service**. A further 23 per cent said that this experience confirmed their already high opinion of Acas, or met their high expectations.

This meant that about two in five of respondents (41 per cent) reported a shift in their perceptions of the organisation. Nearly one in eight of all respondents (12 per cent) made a general acknowledgement that their opinion had improved. The most common specific explanation given was of a new found awareness of the breadth of Acas services or support on offer (seven per cent) or that they were more approachable than previously thought (three per cent).

"It has made me more aware / appreciative of what they do and their wider functions other than purely dispute mediation."

"It is far more; I hadn't appreciated all the umbrellas Acas have. The extent of the service it provides. The E&D was news to me and the performance management."

There were a further 47 positive comments, for example about an inclination to use Acas again (14 comments) or a general endorsement of the service received (16 comments).

"I'm impressed, it's a good service, it was prompt, focused and attentive."

Twelve respondents made negative comments, most commonly relating to the promptness or resourcing of the service (three comments):

"I have become more aware of their lack of resources, although they tried to deliver in the time scale, they weren't able to easily."

13.3 Other satisfaction measures

Respondents were asked to consider if they would recommend the Acas in-depth advisory service to others, and if they would use the service again. Nearly all (97 per cent) said that they would recommend this service, with just five respondents saying they would not. All but eight respondents (97 per cent) said that they would use this service again, with just three (one per cent) saying they would not [Table 13.2].

Table 13.2 Other satisfaction measures**Base: All respondents (316)**

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Would you recommend this service to others or not?		
Yes	305	97
No	5	2
Don't know	6	2
Would you use this service again or not?		
Yes	308	97
No	3	1
Don't know	5	2

No subgroups were significantly more likely to say that they would not recommend the service to others, or not use the service again.

CHAPTER 14

Suggestions and Desired Improvements to the Acas in-depth advisory service

14.1 Desired improvements to the Acas in-depth advisory service

Respondents were given the opportunity to say **how the Acas in-depth advisory service could be improved, or be more useful to their organisation**. Nearly two thirds of respondents (63 per cent) could not think of a way that the service could be improved. Of those that could, the most commonly cited ways related to resourcing issues, such as delivering the service more promptly or improving availability of advisers. These could sometimes relate to the efficiency of the Acas Helpline rather than the In-depth advisory service.

“Availability and accessibility of advisors; had to persist to get hold of adviser.”

“Quicker response, often when you phone the topics are urgent and it would be good to speak to someone straight away.”

Table 14.1 Suggestions for improvements to the Acas in-depth advisory service

Base: All respondents (316)

	No. of respondents	Per cent
Quicker response/ return calls more promptly	18	6
Improved accessibility/ availability of advisers	13	4
Shorter initial wait on telephone/ hard to get through initially	11	3
Reduced costs/ offer more free services	10	3
Increase awareness/ publicity of the service	9	3
More advisers required/ more time/ availability of advisers	7	2
More local/ regional services e.g. workshops, ‘drop in’ sessions	7	2
Improvements to the website	7	2
Continuity with same adviser/ smoother handovers when change	6	2
Improve quality of advice given	6	2
More advisers on specialist areas/ more in-depth understanding of our industry	6	2
Other suggestions	48	15

Others suggested more free or lower cost services, or more of a local focus.

"I suppose the only issue I have is that if we had had to call on Acas for mediation it would have been very costly - I think £700 a day - which is a lot for a small organisation."

Respondents were then given an opportunity to make any **closing remarks about the in-depth advisory service from Acas**. Most (63 per cent) had no further comments or reiterated their high opinions of the service in general (22 per cent), or the advisers in particular (three per cent). Seven respondents noted the positive effects the advice had led to in their organisation, whilst six raised the need for more publicity or awareness-raising of the service.

"For a small company it's nice to know there's advice you can rely on. Took a long time to discuss matter on the phone and it resolved something that could have gone horribly wrong."

"It would be useful to have some advertising etc as I'm not sure how well known it is."

CHAPTER 15

Subsequent use of Acas Services

15.1 Subsequent use of Acas in-depth advisory services

The interviews were with a random selection of people who had used the Acas in-depth advisory service between three and ten months previously. They were asked **if they had used this particular service since**, regarding other matters from the ones discussed in the interview.

Nearly three in ten (29 per cent) had used the in-depth advisory services since. Longer term customers were most likely to have used the service again with, for example, 41 per cent of those with more than three years experience of the service having done so since.

15.2 Subsequent use of other Acas services

Almost three in ten (29 per cent) of respondents **had used Acas services other than the in-depth advisory service since using the latter**. This could be with regard to the same issue or with regard to a different matter.

A Customer Journey (5)

A small private sector company received advice from Acas by telephone regarding workplace conflict. They approached a previously established contact at Acas, and exchanged three telephone calls and two emails over a three month period. They felt the balance was right between email, telephone and face-to-face contact.

"It was issues two employees had between them: conflict. We'd exhausted the internal process and needed someone to give a guiding hand. Basically the two parties couldn't work together we needed an impartial perspective on it.

[Acas advised] that they could provide the mediation and how the process could work, and it did work. [The employees] are now getting on well together, there's an improved situation and improved performance.

Very impressed with the service."

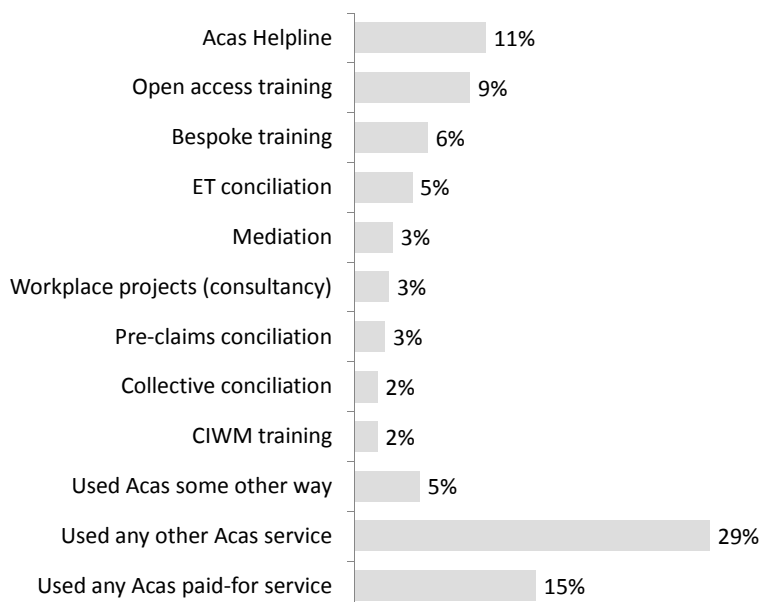
The organisation saw the advice as both useful and practical, and identified much improved staff morale, as well as much better communication, trust and day to day

working relationships between managers and employees, as direct results of the Acas advice. They also have witnessed some improvement in organisational performance in terms of quality of service or output, productivity, and meeting objectives or targets. They were 'extremely satisfied' with the advice they received.

Again, longer term and previous customers were more likely to have used other Acas services in this period [Chart 15.1]. For example, those who reported that they had used the in-depth advice service before the time in question were more likely than average (35 per cent) to have used other services since.

Chart 15.1 Subsequent use of other Acas services

Base: All respondents (316)



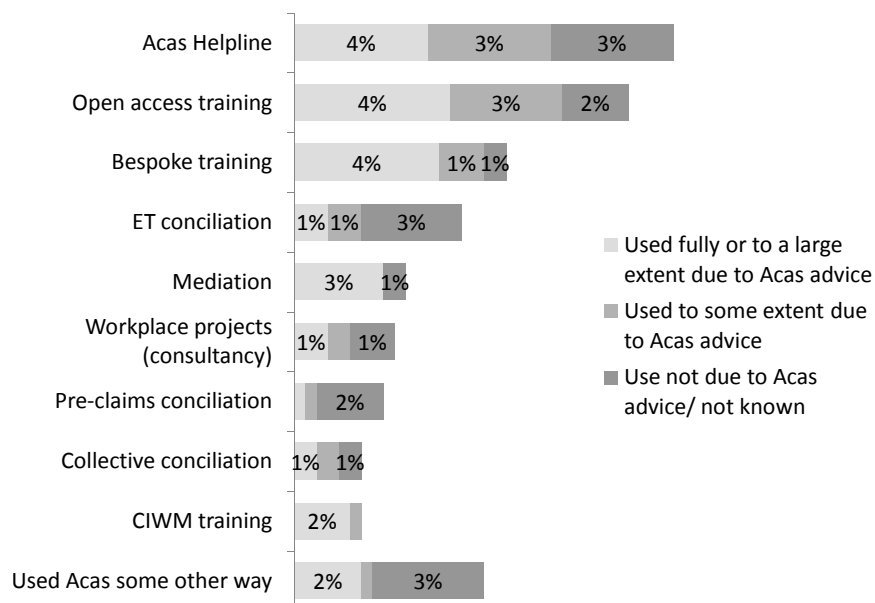
More than one in seven (15 per cent) of the in-depth advisory service customers **went on to use any Acas paid-for services**, most commonly for open access (nine per cent) or bespoke workplace (six per cent) training courses.

One in nine respondents had contacted the Acas Helpline since using the in-depth advisory service between May and October last year.

Respondents were asked to say **to what extent the use of these services was due to their use of the in-depth advisory service**. One in nine of all respondents (11 per cent), or nearly two fifths (39 per cent) of all those going on to use other services, said that the use of these services was due either 'fully' or 'to a large extent' to the *advice* they had received from the in-depth advisory service. More than one in six of all respondents (18 per cent) (or 62 per cent of those using these other services) said that use of these services was due at least 'some extent' to use of the advisory services beforehand [Chart 15.2].

Chart 15.2 Extent to which use of other Acas services was due to advice received

Base: All respondents (316)



CHAPTER 16

North West Recession Project

In 2009, the North West Development Agency provided additional funding for recession-related advisory work to be undertaken by the Acas offices in North West England. The details of 26 individuals who were advised regarding the recession in the first half of 2009, by advisers from these offices, were passed to Alpha Research. 13 were interviewed between 15th February and 20th March 2010.

This chapter summarises the findings from these 13 interviews.

16.1 Previous relationship with Acas

Ten of the 13 organisations had had **previous contact with Acas** prior to seeking recession-related advice during the first half of 2009, around the same proportion as in the in-depth advisory service survey (referred to as IDAS in the remainder of this chapter). Four of the respondents had had previous contact with the Acas adviser who advised them regarding the recession.

16.2 Other agencies supplying recession-related advice

Respondents were asked **what other agencies they had considered approaching for recession-related advice**, as well as which ones they had actually approached.

Eight of the 13 had not considered any other agency (cf. 43 per cent in IDAS), whilst three had considered employment lawyers, two considered Business Link and two considered Job Centre Plus. One respondent had both considered and used the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development.

16.3 Reason for contacting Acas

Respondents were asked to explain **what triggered their organisation seeking advice from Acas**. The majority of the respondents were wanting guidance on making redundancies or procedures to follow with regard to redundancy, or how to consult with employees about redundancies. Three were interested in advice regarding salary cuts, pay freezes or shorter working hours.

"We had to put our own staff in short time working on a four day week and had to ensure we were doing the best we could."

"It was for clarification on legal process, compliance with current legislation. We had a redundancy programme and I wanted their opinion that it was water tight from their point of view."

Respondents were more likely to say that they were seeking clarification or confirmation of existing redundancy procedures in place in their organisation, rather than setting up new systems from scratch. For example, they wanted to check their legal compliance or that their procedures were suitably equitable for all parties involved. Seven of the 13 organisations came into this category, but there were also four who were seeking more direct advice on what to do or how to go about it.

"Looking for their expertise in employment relations and how they might manage downsizing and redundancy issues on behalf of employees in this area."

"We wanted them to run training courses for us for 'difficult conversations'."

16.4 Acas Services used for recession-related advice

There were a number of possible **ways in which organisations in the North West might have utilised Acas for recession-related advice**, over and above the 'traditional' telephone, face-to-face or email in-depth advisory services. This could include an appointment for a confidential conversation with an Acas adviser at a local Acas redundancy-related surgery, or attendance at a workshop or recession-related training event.

However, amongst the 13 organisations participating in this research, all but one had received in-depth advice in the usual manner. Ten had been advised in person by Acas advisers outside of the surgery or workshop format (four had met the adviser more than once) and four had been advised by telephone (three of these involving more than one call). Just one had attended a training course tailored to the recession and none had attended a surgery or workshop.

Of the three individuals who received both telephone and face-to-face advice, two did not express a preference for either mode, and one found the face-to-face service to be more comprehensive:

"Better face to face, you can feel you get all your questions answered, no gaps."

The one respondent who attended an **Acas recession-related training event** heard about it through an associate. They felt it fully addressed their training

needs and that the format was fairly effective. No suggestions were made for improving this sort of event.

16.5 Perceptions of Acas advice received

Respondents were asked to rate the Acas advisers on various dimensions. Consistent with IDAS, on every level all or nearly all respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that Acas met customer service objectives. For example, every respondent strongly agreed that the advisers were qualified, willing to help, sensitive and professional. In all other instances except one, if a respondent did not ‘strongly agree’ they ‘tended to agree’. The exception was one respondent who ‘tended to disagree’ that Acas held an impartial stance [Table 16.1].

Table 16.1 Perceptions of advice received

Base: All respondents (NWRP) (13)

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
The advisers..				
..were qualified to help you	13	0	0	0
..were willing to help you	13	0	0	0
..gave you sufficient time to explain your query	12	1	0	0
..understood the issues facing your workplace	12	1	0	0
..were knowledgeable of the latest relevant legislation	11	2	0	0
..dealt with your issue sensitively	13	0	0	0
..maintained an impartial stance	12	0	1	0
..were professional	13	0	0	0
..gave useful advice	12	1	0	0
..gave practical advice	12	1	0	0

16.6 Actions taken since receiving Acas advice

Respondents were asked to **describe the actions their organisation took as a result of the advice**. Ten of the 13 respondents (cf. 69% in IDAS) said that some action was taken, most commonly (five respondents) with regard to protocols for redundancies:

“Which steps to take to follow the redundancy procedures correctly.”

“We were able to lay off successfully and it saved our company.”

One organisation was advised to and instigated a temporary four-day week for employees. Others referred inconclusively to possibilities that they could explore (two respondents); or to how their organisation now communicated differently with employees (one); or how it had worked to raise awareness of issues discussed with Acas (one).

"Made us more aware of such things."

Of the ten organisations that took actions, seven claimed that it had been largely or fully **possible to take the measures suggested by Acas**:

"We actioned really all of it."

"Fully, we used one of the alternatives and they offered us two."

For others, the service provided more of an affirmation of intended actions:

"I'd already got a view of where we were to go so what we discussed was implemented. I was really looking for re-assurance and working within the legal framework."

Four organisations reported **problems they had encountered implementing the suggested actions**. These all related to resistance encountered from employees or unions, but they were overcome:

"Resistance from employees and unions. No one wants to have money cut but in order to maintain their jobs it was better to take a pay cut."

16.7 Impacts of Acas advice

The survey asked directly **how the Acas advice had affected the way in which organisations had managed the recession**.

Four of the respondents identified that the advice had given them confidence to follow routes they were considering, or in how to apply the correct procedures:

"It helped, it confirmed our thinking and it gave us the confidence to implement what we were trying to do."

Three others made specific reference to subsequent redundancy programs which they were able to implement appropriately:

"It allowed us to match the work involved to the number of people thereby cutting unnecessary staff costs."

Three others made reference to the general impact that the advice had made on helping their business through the recession, for example by allowing the organisation to shave costs or stay afloat:

"Due to the advice given we were able to continue trading. Had to secure the business."

"Cost cutting, 'cut the cloth', they showed us the right way."

Other avenues opened up as a result of the advice. For one, this was relevant Acas training and for another it was an opportunity which arose for partnership working:

"We wanted them to provide the training for us re recession matters."

The respondents considered **if the advice had lead to different numbers of people being made redundant and/or whether redundancies were handled differently**. None said that the volume of redundancies went up or down, but three recognised that their procedures for handling lay offs had changed as a result:

"It did, it confirmed and influenced the way we did it, the procedure we followed that's how it influenced us."

Another noted that redundancy had been avoided, as hoped:

"No, didn't make any redundancies and that's what we were trying to avoid anyway."

There were also some impacts on employee policies or organisation communication with the work force. As a result of the Acas advice, two organisations had made such changes and another was reviewing current policies.

"We now know what to do. Have written agreements with employees re such matters should they occur."

"Marginally only, like when you put a notice on the board you put a date on it. We had become lax in putting notices up."

16.8 Overall Satisfaction

As in the main survey, the respondents were asked to give **a rating out of seven for how satisfied they were with the service they received**, where

one indicated extreme dissatisfaction and seven indicated extreme satisfaction. [Table 16.2]. Eight scored the advice seven out of seven, and the remaining five scored either five or six out of seven. The mean score of 6.38 was similar to IDAS (6.22).

Table 16.2 Overall satisfaction

Base: All respondents (NWRP) (13)

	No. of respondents
Score given:	
7 – extremely satisfied	8
6	2
5	3
4	0
3	0
2	0
1 – extremely dissatisfied	0

Those giving the maximum score or six out of seven reiterated how the advice had enabled their organisation to move forward, to address and successfully deal with the matter. They identified how the advice had given the organisation the tools to address such issues in future.

"Because their advice was excellent and showed us how to manage though a difficult time."

"Because it's important for us to have the confidence to deal with these matters."

Amongst the three scoring the advice five out of seven, one indicated that it was more the follow-on training than the initial advice that was important to them, another felt it was important to allow in their score for some (unspecified) improvement, but the third did seem a little less satisfied because the advice left them with choices to make:

"Because I didn't get a definitive answer, it was you can either do this or the other and I had two different routes and I had to make a choice."

When asked to consider **if the advice had changed their perceptions of Acas**, most (10 out of 13) respondents said it had not, of which six also said that their already high opinions were maintained. None indicated negative perceptions of Acas at this point:

"Unchanged, always had respect for them."

The remaining three respondents indicated that their opinion of Acas had improved since seeking recession-related advice:

"More positive, I would ring as first port of call."

Mirroring IDAS, respondents here were asked **if they would recommend this service to others and/or use the service again**. All 13 respondents answered yes to both questions.

16.9 Improvements to Acas recession-related advice

Respondents were asked to comment on what more they would have liked from Acas regarding recession-related advice, or what improvements they would like to see to Acas services. There was very little they were able to say here, for all felt that Acas had met their needs. However, one respondent did indicate a perception that the process could be a protracted one:

"No, they gave me what I was looking for."

"None, other that it took four months of continuous talking."

Nine of the thirteen respondents could not think how Acas services more widely could be improved:

"Couldn't be [improved], happy with what we have."

"...we've found this a 'god send' on all aspects of our work."

"Very professional, helpful and polite."

Two identified access issues with the general Acas Helpline, specifically the time to make contact. There were also single calls for more training services, more free publications, or more definitive advice:

"Could do more training for employees re disciplinary, grievance and contracts of employment."

"If there were more free publications, a book perhaps not always off the web-site."

"It would be that they could give a definitive answer as a solicitor would."

16.10 Further Contact with Acas

One respondent only of the thirteen receiving recession-related advice from Acas under the North West Recession project had **used other Acas services since receiving their advice** (cf. 29% in IDAS). This was the Acas Helpline, and its use was felt to be 'to a large extent' a direct result of the earlier advice they received relating to the recession.

Four of the thirteen felt that **Acas services were higher profile in their area now than they were one year previously**. Reasons given for the higher profile of Acas were: increased publicity, local events, word of mouth in the local business community and evidence that Acas were very busy [Table 16.3].

Table 16.3 Whether Acas's services are seen as being more widely promoted in the area now than they were are year or so ago

Base: All respondents (NWRP) (13)

	No. of respondents
Yes	4
No	6
Don't know	3

Of the other nine respondents, eight felt that local profile of Acas was unchanged, but one did feel that their profile had actually diminished:

"Probably less actually, never see any correspondence from them."

One suggestion was made for how Acas could enhance its presence - through a (perceived) wider offering:

"We need more services – [Acas] could be more versatile in what they offer. They could give more of a service to small companies in training and development legislation."

