Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Local Government Benchmarking Framework written submissions

Introduction

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee undertakes an annual examination of the development of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework. This was developed by the Improvement Service (IS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executive's (SOLACE Scotland), to assist Scottish local authorities to improve their delivery of public services.

The Committee issued a short call for views in late February 2015 (with a closing date of 13 March 2015) in order to canvass some views on the Benchmarking system. This is the first occasion on which the Committee has canvassed any public views on benchmarking and it intends to learn the lessons from this exercise to as to inform similar engagement exercises in the future.

Views received

The Committee intends that the views received will be taken into account when taking evidence from IS and SOLACE Scotland on 25 March 2015 on the benchmarking system.

The Committee, as well as asking for any general feedback on benchmarking, asked the following specific questions—

- Were you aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?
- Would you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?
- What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The following views were received by the Committee—

- John Bullen **(page 2)**
- CLEAR **(page 2)**
- Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council (Ella Simpson, Director) **(page 3)**
- Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council (Milind Kolhatkar, Senior Development Worker, Community Planning) **(page 4)**
- Fife Environmentalist **(page 4)**
- Loreburn Community Council **(page 5)**
- Maryhill Summerston Community Council **(page 7)**
- Museums Galleries Scotland **(page 7)**
- North Ayrshire Council **(page 11)**
- Lynne Palmer **(page 12)**
- South Ayrshire Council **(page 13)**
- William Howard **(page 13)**

Views received from John Bullen

Until today I was not aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

I will use the Framework to see how my local authority is performing. I have volunteered to provide feedback and my opinion to our council on numerous matters.

I will be able to see the data on what my council spends on what services and how efficient the council is. This will keep me better informed.

Views received from CLEAR

We are making this feedback on the benchmarking system as a local community group (now a registered charity) - and have of which we have only become aware through being invited to comment via Fife People's Panel

We appreciate the effort made to `quantify' or capture relevant comparative data on performance and achievement. Given the squeeze on Council funding, we hope the cost-benefit ratio of collecting such information remains proportionate

We note three important areas of Council operation where benchmarking has not been extended but which would be beneficial. Since all the benchmarks are `sectoral' (and with more emphasis on institutional efficiency) the first one is of particular importance.

1. Local democracy and consultation: The only indicators used in the Framework at present are a very narrow, institutional one `Cost of the democratic core'. Yet Council operation need to be based on functioning democratic practice and consultation with residents. In some areas, especially those of higher deprivation, community councils do not function, and community forums (fora) which operated in their absence have also ended here some years ago and even Local Offices no longer seem to have mechanisms (which functioned until several years ago) to gather feedback, complaints, suggestions for addressing specific local problems. As a result there now exists a basic democratic deficit - no avenue for local residents to express views or even, consistently, to be consulted. Even Councillor surgeries, though poorly attended, do not always function well. Occasionally for planned developments or Local Plans, consultation roadshows are organised though these also seem hit and miss. The People's Panel offer some scope for feedback but not necessarily evenly representation across all areas/demographics

Suggestion: One or more indicators need to be developed to measure the extent to which Councils are consulting residents and offering opportunities for feedback and interaction. In addition, a measure of the activity and cost-effectiveness of Councillors should also be added..

2. Missing `sectors' or areas of activity: We note that support to the third/voluntary sector does not seem to be included in any shape or format. Yet all Councils do this, seeking to promote social capital, extend local services, events and initiatives - so some benchmark needs to be added here

Transport is another area conspicuously absent (apart from road maintenance). We understand Councils all support bus services to varying degrees and, indirectly (through park and ride etc) rail services. A benchmark is needed here

3. Sub-areas: If statistics permitted, as a local group, we would find benchmarking more immediately relevant if available at the sub-council level (perhaps Area Committees)

We hope these observations can be fed in for consideration.

Were you aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- No, not before this notification.

Would you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

- As general background in raising community issues.

What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

- Further breakdown if data by area within Councils (probably Area Committees). Adding in more information on democratic consultation and performance, and on voluntary sector support and transport.

Views received from Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council
(Ella Simpson, Director)

Were you aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- I was aware of standards that local authorities should strive for e.g. good practice in consultation however I was not aware of this framework

Would you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

- Absolutely – I have just read the latest report and it is a succinct summary of the key delivery requirements of local government.

What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

- Knowing it is there is a giant leap! It would be amazing if this information could be x referenced to best practice.

As a post script the performance of our local council is vital to the third sector. Within Edinburgh there is agreement across all sectors that we must work together to ensure that citizens have the support they need to fulfil their potential. EVOC's role and purpose is to ensure that the voices of the third sector are heard in policy and strategy development and service delivery, to this end we support thematic and geographical networks and forums, hold thinkSpace events, collate responses to local and national consultations as well as support engagement in community planning. This report will provide a useful backdrop to these discussions.

**Views received from Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council
(Milind Kolhatkar, Senior Development Worker, Community Planning)**

[Brief response in fine, two substantive points:]

I'm hopeful that we will learn to focus rather on shared community planning outcomes (via soa frameworks) than on single-agency (such as council or health authority) outcomes and, it is my firm view (having considered these issues more than most) that 'thin' (single-service or single-indicator) measures are of far less value than are 'thick' measures which are complex combinations of 'thin' ones.

One way we can make these shifts real is not Just to measure 'service outcomes' but to raise our gaze to more meaningful 'life outcomes' (like 'to what extent do we exercise our human rights?' Or - even better - 'to what degree are our human capabilities.

Views received from a Fife Environmentalist

We want to hear your views on the Benchmarking system.

- My view is that it is mince. On a good day I might be generous and give it 2/10.

Most of your "environmental" indicators have little to do with the environmental performance of councils. They are mostly about the financial performance of councils, which is an important thing to look at but not the same thing.

Chuck your past work out, get some people onboard who know what they are doing and start again from scratch. If you are actually serious about benchmarking environmental issues then I suggest you employ Friends of the Earth Scotland to draw up some benchmarks. If you do this and follow what they say you might be part of the solution, if you don't you are clearly part of the problem.

For example, "Net cost of waste collection per premise", tells me precisely nothing about how well the collections were undertaken. To take an extreme example, it would be cheapest (in the sort term) to tip all the stuff into the sea. However, that is not done for various reasons.

Some actual environmental benchmarks would include:

- greenhouse gas emissions, split into say household, industry, commerce, transport, electricity generation; how each council compares to the Scottish, UK and European averages and how these have varied over time

- sustainable transport indicators; walking, cycling and public transport indicators; reduction in length and width of large roads; reductions in motorised road traffic (given the heroin-like addiction of the government to building large new roads this would probably encounter strong opposition from many party politicians, but if that lot are objecting it is a good indication that the indicator is revealing something that lot want hidden); fares on public transport and how these compare to the cost of motoring; roads transformed into something more suitable for walking, cycling and public transport

- renewables indicators and how these have varied over time; capacity and output in particular categories, how this has varied over time ans what the council are proposing to do in the future (so they can be held to account if they don't do what they promise).

- your percentage of waste recycled, split into types (like plastic, metals, paper and so on) and expanded up the waste hierarchy to include the percentage of waste re-used and the percentage of waste reduced. You appear not to understand waste issues, hence only recycling is included. This is an example of why you need the input of people who know what they are talking about, like Friends of the Earth Scotland.

Start at Friends of the Earth Scotland [Campaigns and Projects](#) for some of the important issues which real benchmarks would cover.

In other fields there will, I imagine, be equally well respected organisations which could lead you in the right direction. For example, Shelter on housing. If the people behind [Improvement Scotland](#) are not aware of the right organisations then that that would be a huge admission in itself. It may be that you are so incompetent that you don't know who the right organisations are, but I suspect not.

Were you aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- No.

Would you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing

- No. It is mince.

What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

- Some real benchmarks, not the largely mince ones you have come up with in the area I have looked at. Even if your benchmarks in all the other areas are perfect your stuff is useless because of the botch-up on the environment.

Views received from Loreburn Community Council

The Improvement Services (IS) is yet another quango and not overly objective, it grew from small beginnings developing a Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF) (which actually began at West Lothian Council). PSIF reproduces much of the criteria from Investors in People (IIP), the European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) and Customer Service Excellence. It probably also uses Audit Scotland Best Values principles. It is a self-assessment tool and in our opinion not really worth the paper it is written on primarily because Councils "self assess". D & G Council is one of the Councils who use the framework. They stopped using IIP and started using this instead mainly I understand because of cost. However, it is fair to say that their performance has not been effective or efficient over the past number of years and there is more emphasis in showing how good they are in words rather than action. We at the Community Council are never consulted on performance or benchmarking and certainly do not feel engaged with the Council.

Were we aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- Loreburn Community Council were not aware of this framework.

Would you use the Framework to see how your local Authority is performing?

- The short answer is yes but we do not believe that self assessment frameworks are objective and therefore offer a true representation of performance. While IS indicate that they wish to avoid a "league table" the evidence is provided or presented in exactly this way. Therefore one must ask how objective data input is when Councils are actually being "compared" against their peers.

What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

- We would be encouraged if we could see what "difference" our Local Authority will make when seeking to continuously improve its services against specific indicators and/or Best Practice.

While *Quantitative* data is reported there is also a need to set it within the context of qualitative information.

Each Council should be accountable for implementing continuous improvement and be held to account if it fails to do so. Audit Scotland Best Value reports offer a more robust challenge with respect to delivering improved services. We are unsure what IS will be able to do by way of holding Local Authorities to account. If no action is taken to improve performance we fail to see the benefit of the Framework. Benchmarking (self assessment) is only one of many tools which support continuous business improvement, it is not an end in itself. We fail to see how your "next steps" will make a difference. There is a danger that your "Next Steps" will become hidebound in process and verbosity.

There is a real danger that IS is becoming yet another quango which is unable to deliver change or improvement. The implementation of PSIF is a good example of "self congratulation" rather than critical self review.

There are a number of models of good practice with respect to benchmarking, APSE is one such model, Audit Scotland Best Value reviews are another. Both offer a much structured approach in supporting continuous improvement. We remain unsure why IS are reinventing the wheel.

Investors in People, the European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) and Customer Service Awards are all external benchmarking quality management frameworks that underpin the work of any benchmarking approach. As per our comments above there needs to be a more rigorous and holistic approach to evaluation of service provision than self assessment.

Views received from Maryhill Summerston Community Council

In response to your call for views on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework to inform your evidence session with IS and SOLACE, below is submitted on behalf of Maryhill & Summerston Community Council.

Possible question for IS and SOLACE:

- How will SOLACE and Improvement Service guard against an overly target-driven culture of 'service delivery'; the welcome provision of comparative data could place extra pressure on local authorities to focus on delivering targets, and targets do not always illustrate qualitative detail of Council services.

Were you aware of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- No.

Would you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

- Yes.

What would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

Offering wider range of performance indicators for comparison, eg departmental costs, number of successful appeals to planning decisions, more environmental information etc. Also some indicators such as 'How clean are my local streets' seem overly broad (ie without any indication about how this figure is arrived at) and therefore need more explanatory detail to be useful. Also would be great to have local Community Council ward breakdown within Glasgow City Council for more local relevance

Other comment:

Apologies that this has been submitted a few hours after your submission deadline, but we were notified of this on 12th March, at 2.30pm, giving us just over 24 hours to respond. We are obviously grateful for the opportunity to comment and feed into the Committee's work on this, but it would have been helpful to have had at least a week's notice so that it could be more thoroughly considered.

Views received from Museums Galleries Scotland

Background

Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) is the National Development Body for the museum sector in Scotland. Our role is to work collaboratively to invest in and develop a sustainable museum and galleries sector for Scotland, in line with the aims of Going Further: The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries.

We work with a sector of over 400 museums and galleries, supporting and enabling them to meet their objectives in a number of ways, including through strategic investment, advice, advocacy and skills development opportunities.

Awareness of Local Government Benchmarking Framework

MGS welcomes the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Scottish museums sector.

MGS were aware of the LG Benchmarking Framework however there are no records of consultation preceding the finalisation of SOLACE Benchmarking indicators relating to museums and galleries in Scotland. Previously MGS had fed guidance to Audit Scotland on two relevant Statutory Performance Indicators regarding visits to and use of museums:

   a) The number of visits to/usages of council funded or part funded museums per 1,000 population
   b) The number of those visits that were in person per 1,000 population

SOLACE Benchmarking Measures

MGS has views on the current benchmarking measure details as follows:

C & L 3: Cost per visit to museums and galleries

 - Both elements of this composite indicator, cost and visits, are volatile. These factors limit any comparison between different local authorities.

 - Despite guidance notes, we have concerns that cost figures are not consistently applied across services and all local authorities. This is due to the large variation in what can be considered as a local authority supported museum or gallery.

 - Visit figures are also volatile because museums' opening hours differ substantially, many are not open during winter months, especially in rural areas; the physical capacity of museums to hold large numbers of visitors varies hugely, some are one room operations and others have more than one site. There are instances where museums temporarily close all or parts of their buildings for redevelopment/ refurbishment.

 - Furthermore, we do not regard this measure as relevant to what council services delivered to customers and citizens. The indicator implies cost per visit is a suitable measure of performance. Museums offer value not only as visitor attractions but as education providers and community organisations. Academic research has highlighted visitor numbers as a shallow metric of performance. Museums reach people through off-site activities, including outreach project, collaboration with third sector organisations on projects with vulnerable societal groups and increasingly through digital means. Museums often involve high numbers of local volunteers, therefore museums are also great examples of civic society organisations.

C & L 5c: Percentage of adults satisfied with museums and galleries

 - This is gathered through the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), a large-scale data set with a time-lag between collection and analysis of at least a year. Therefore, MGS have concerns that the indicator is not underpinned by timely data.

- The question is based on an assumption that people would know which museums and galleries can be regarded as 'local authority' services. As such we are not confident that it is statistically and methodologically robust for use as a benchmark for local authority museums and galleries.

- Comparison between local authority areas with regards to museums and galleries is inappropriate given recent changes in service delivery and a regularly changing picture of governance arrangements. Trusts have become more prevalent as a delivery model for local authority museum services. Therefore some local authorities still directly run museum and galleries services, others have a trust model in place where the trust runs the services on behalf of councils. Each trust model differs in the exact arrangements.

- In the "My local council" portal this is reported as 'how satisfied are residents with local museums and galleries?' The actual wording of the variable in the SHS is 'Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of these council services?: C Museums and Galleries'. As a result the way the data is reported is misleading, not all museums and galleries within an area can be regarded as 'council services', museums can be national, independent or part of larger institutions e.g. universities.

- Satisfaction can be affected by the availability of local authority supported museums and galleries in an area as well as the actual experience of visiting them.

The reasons why performance varies between councils, especially similar councils

With regards to your request for views on Reasons why performance varies between councils there are a number of important points:

At an individual museum level:

- The size of museums differ (workforce, physical size)

- Museums can be temporarily closed for redevelopment/ refurbishment

At a local authority level:

- The transport accessibility for museums differs depending on where they are located

At a national level:

- The number of museums within each local authority area differs

- The number of museums supported by each local authorities differs

- There have been fluctuations in which museums within an area receive funding directly from their local authority

- The delivery of cultural provision by local authorities has been changing. There are a growing number of trusts delivering cultural services in Scotland.

Due to differing arrangements across all Scottish local authorities MGS is not in a position to provide advice on which councils could be regarded as 'similar' with respect to museums and galleries provision.

Context of Museum and Gallery Benchmarking Results

We take this opportunity to provide some context in reference to relevant points made within National Benchmarking Overview Report 2013/14 (p.14).

MGS are concerned by reports of reductions in expenditure from local authority sources. Reduced spending on museums by local authorities is not necessarily a positive indicator of performance in this context. Reduced costs can have the knock-on-effect of staff cuts, and operating reductions e.g. opening hours, outreach work, programming and collections care.

The report states, 'customer satisfaction rates for all culture and leisure facilities, except parks, have fallen in the last 12 months.' MGS are not aware of this being the case for museums and galleries, the last published figures are for the 2013 Scottish Household Survey. If satisfaction rates have fallen this may be connected to reductions in gross expenditure and the service that museums have the capacity to offer.

'Further exploration is required to understand the factors behind increased museum use; however increased promotion of exhibits and more robust footfall counting procedures may be contributing.' With relation to the rise in museum use, there are many other latent variables which affect behavioural patterns. Visits to museums and galleries are not necessarily made by people living within their local authority area, or indeed in Scotland. Consequently this could also relate to non-domestic tourism visits to Scotland e.g. 2014 these were affected by the Commonwealth Games.

How councils use the data to assess their own way of doing things, and how they learn from similar councils

MGS have concerns that current, non-robust performance indicators are being used by councils to inappropriately compare their museums and galleries provision with other councils. This comes in the context of gross expenditure reductions. The emphasis of these comparisons can focus on cost savings rather than understanding the important contribution of museums to local areas. The following publications provide an insight into museums' contribution:

Going Further: The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries
http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/research-and-resources/resources/publications/publication/460/going-further-the-national-strategy-for-scotlands-museums; and

One Year On: Turning Actions into Advocacy
http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/national-strategy-and-delivery/national-strategy-delivery/one-year-on:-turning-actions-into-advocacy/

Cornerstones of Communities
http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/research-and-resources/resources/publications/publication/223/cornerstones-of-communities-report

How service users could use the data to assess their council's performance

The Explore the Data portal can give a misleading picture of performance. The quantitative nature of the measures though visual representation in graphs encourages comparisons between local authorities. With regards to museums and gallery related indicators, like-for-like comparisons are inappropriate for the reasons outlined above.

Closing Remarks

MGS recognises the importance of improvement processes which help organisations understand how they perform in comparison to other relevant organisations. MGS would welcome any further consultation by IS with regards to suitable measures in relation to museums and galleries for benchmarking purposes in order to further the rigour and systematic nature of its processes.

Views received from North Ayrshire Council

As a council, we have been involved with the Improvement Service in the creation and continued development of the Framework.

North Ayrshire Council has embraced the benchmarking framework to support our improvement journey and as a way of working:

- **Publication**

    o We publish a report on our performance based on the benchmarking comparisons with other councils – this report is submitted to our Cabinet, shared throughout the Council's directorates and published on the public-facing website.

    o Our public website contains information on the background to the framework and numerous links to key benchmarking groups in which we are involved. We also link our public website to the interactive mylocalcouncil.info site. This allows the public to access data and benchmarks from all councils.

    o The performance teams in the Council write a narrative to accompany the charts – the narratives outline the work that has taken place with regards the specific category of indicators as well as the future improvement work.

- **Improvements**. We use the information in our LGBF report to help support our improvement journey. This may be through identifying or confirming areas to be improved. It also allows us to evaluate progress already made from improvements undertaken.

- **Family Groups**. We are involved in leading and supporting family group activity. The benefit of comparing similar councils ensures that the benchmarking is more relevant, meaningful and robust.

There are a number of areas of potential improvement in the framework itself, many of which the Improvement Service will be aware:

- **Improvements in other Councils**. Each year, some Councils do exceptionally well in some of the indicators compared with previous years and their peer councils.   However, other than the sharing of some best practice on the Knowledge Hub site and ad hoc meetings to discuss family group activity, there is currently little opportunity to learn from each other.

- **Correct metrics for some indicators?** There are some indicators that would be more appropriately measured by alternative means.   For example, one of the indicators is the cost of parks and open spaces per 1,000 population – would this metric be better suited to acres/hectares of parks and open spaces?

- **Length of time until publication.** Perhaps one of the main areas of focus for the Framework should be to reduce the time taken between the end of the financial year and the official publication of the data (end of January 2015 this year).   The public may make more use of the benchmarking data and reports if they reflect a more recent period and are therefore published closer to the reporting period.   Additionally, one of the purposes of benchmarking is to learn from best practice and improve the services we provide to the public.   In North Ayrshire Council we use Lean Six Sigma and other methodologies to continuously improve the services we provide.   Once the benchmarking data is published, the relevant performance indicators are out of date and we may have made substantial improvements since the reporting period.   As such, it is difficult to then determine what areas of the benchmarking indicators we should focus on for improvements.

- **Development of indicators.** I am aware that the Improvement Service and councils review the indicators presented each year and change them accordingly.   It is hoped that these reviews will continue to keep pace with the level of change in Scotland, notably to include the changing environment and legislation – community empowerment, asset transfers, Children's Act, integration of health and social care services, environmental sustainability etc.

There is a vast amount and range of data within the public sector, which can assist councils on their improvement journey.   This wealth of information is not generally available in the private sector and we must leverage it to ensure best practice is shared and overall public sector standards continue to rise.

Views received from Lynne Palmer

I have only recently started to pick up on benchmarking so I would not be able to say much about the Solace/Improvement Service benchmarking framework. But if it is in paper form you could send me a copy for me to be studying the framework to start to get a sense of what it is about.

Views received from South Ayrshire Council

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee annual examination of the development of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

We do have access to Improvement Service direct, and we have offered comments on its draft development plan. In offering comments to the committee we would reinforce the comments that we have made to Improvement Service directly. In question form these would be:

What is Improvement Service doing to improve the framework in the following areas:

- Ensuring that comparisons are valid, based on accurate, comparable data.

- Identifying priority areas for benchmarking, based on policy concerns rather than data availability.

- Refining family groups to ensure they are fit for purpose.

- Engaging local authorities and other stakeholders in developing the Framework.

We understand that the Committee will be aware of the issues underlying the questions above. We look forward to hearing the outcome of your examination.

Views received from William Howard

I really enjoyed reading the benchmark statistics - I didn't know they existed until my wife sent me her email. Can I please be included on emails related to this and other statistical data in the future?

Can I suggest that additional benchmarking be carried out on Direct and Indirect employees? This would give a representation of efficiency in administration, and would help council leaders see how councils could be better managed.

Can I also volunteer myself as a public representative on your teams as I have a lot of experience in private sector industry and commerce, particularly in productivity, quality and service design, and have an IT background.