



Briefing 08/15 March 2008

Parks, Open Spaces and Horticultural Services trend analysis

This briefing provides details of the latest trend analysis of local authority performance on cost, quality and productivity within the parks, open spaces and horticultural services sector. It is provided to local authority chief executives, councils leaders and all APSE parks and open spaces contacts

Key issues

1. Parks, open spaces and horticultural services make a vital contribution to the leisure, health and environmental objectives of local authorities.
2. APSE performance networks for parks, open spaces and horticultural services is now in year 9 of data collection examining cost, quality and productivity issues relating to the service.
3. This briefing highlights the key findings and looks at the future direction of these services in local authorities
4. Analysis referred to in this briefing is based on first batch data returns. Summary reports will be published in March 2008.

1. Introduction

Parks and open spaces contribute to a number of central and local government objectives including aims in the health, well being and sustainable communities agendas. They provide an environment for formal and informal sport, family play, access to open space and the natural environment as well as a setting for the community to come together both on an everyday basis and at organized events. The importance of parks in the public realm, neighbourhoods, social inclusion and as a diversion to criminal activity can not be underestimated. Parks and open spaces require management and maintenance if they are to meet these objectives as effectively as

possible. One element of this is comparison with other providers and the data within this briefing helps to do that.

This briefing highlights the key findings of APSE performance networks data on parks, open spaces and horticultural services and provides an analysis of the state of the sector within local government.

2. Overview of trend information

The APSE performance networks programme for parks, open spaces and horticultural services provides performance indicators for various dimensions of performance; such as cost, productivity and quality. The following trend analysis aims to provide participating authorities with a picture of what the service trends are; what this infers and what further activity and analysis individual authorities and the APSE benchmarking group could consider.

The analysis in this briefing is based on averages across all family groups and so is service-wide for the last eight years (1999/2000 to 2006/7). This year's analysis is based on 75 participating authorities at first batch.

3. Trend analysis

(a) Service efficiency

The cost per thousand head of population indicator, (PI 17) has reduced from £22,830 in 2005/6 to £22,670 in 2007/8 a reduction of 0.7%. The cost per thousand head of population in 1999-2000 was £19,830 and has increased to £22,670 last year, an increase of 14.3%. If this cost had kept pace with inflation it would have increased to approximately £23,560 which is £890 more than the actual average cost. The councils submitting to the PN model appear therefore to have made real savings over the past 8 years.

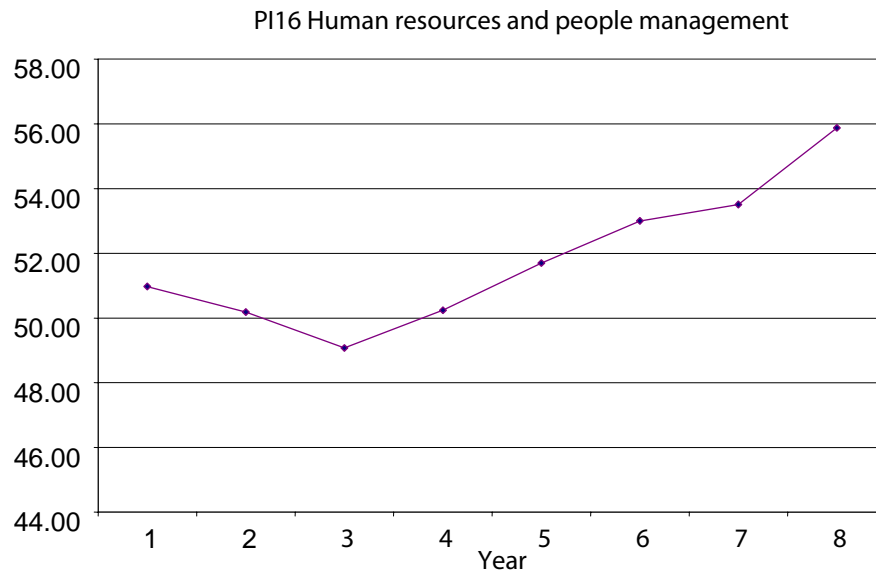
The headline cost per hectare of maintained land indicator (PI 02) has increased by only 0.76% over the year, which is well below the rate of inflation for the second year running. Over the longer term, from 1999-2000 to 2006-07, the figure has increased from £4,809 to £5,625. Again the average actual cost remains lower than the cost if based on inflation which would be £5,715.

In terms of efficiency these two PIs appear to show that local authorities submitting to Performance Networks have performed very well in controlling costs with the result that they are providing the same level of service at a lower cost. This is further demonstrated by the number of hectares maintained per full-time employee (PI 12), which shows an improvement from 7.99 last year to 8.24. There has been a substantial improvement in this figure over the past 8 years with the number of hectares maintained increasing from 7.14 to 8.24, a jump of over 15%. This could be attributed to reducing labour costs, more effective plant and machinery, improvements in travel, set up and close down times or more efficient use of labour.

Central establishment charges as a % of total expenditure (PI 31) have reduced over the last year from 7.24% to 7%. Over the long term however they have increased from 6.07% in 2002-03.

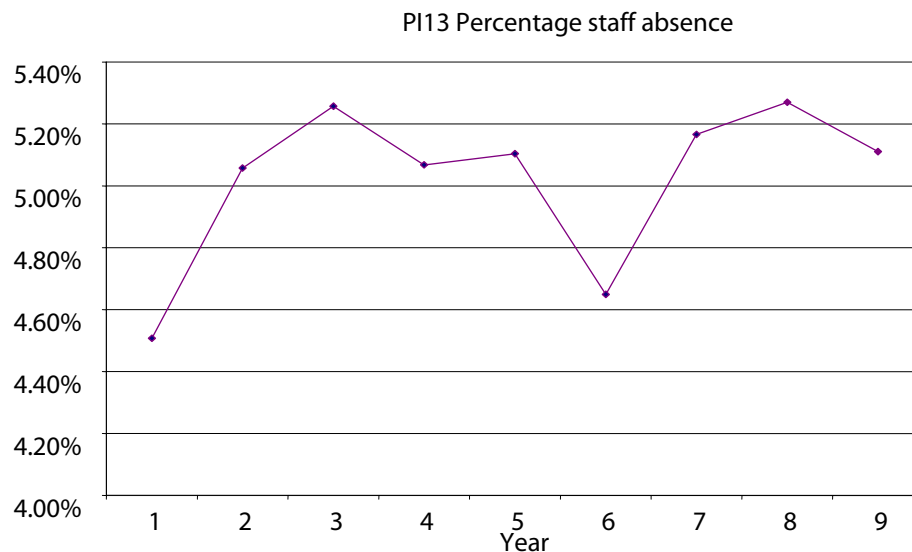
(b) Quality and people management

The performance indicator for human resources and people management (PI16), which measures the extent of investment in training, development and health and safety, continues to improve with an increase of 2.37% over 2006/7. Since 1999-2000 there has been an improvement of 9.6% in this score. This reflects the fact that local authority employers recognise the need to invest in their organisation and staff.



The performance indicator for quality assurance and consultation process score (PI15) which measures issues such as customer consultation, awards, quality processes and complaints has risen again although not as dramatically as last year. This score has fluctuated over the past seven years and currently stands at 67.82.

The percentage of staff absence (PI13) has fallen to 5.11%, which is a welcome reduction but levels of sickness need to be monitored closely. This figure has been at lower levels over the recent past as can be noted from the graph below. Good practice examples such as more flexible working, occupational health support and better health and safety arrangements have led to reductions in absence levels and these examples need to be taken on board more widely.



The output specification indicator (PI23) measures quality standards, frequency of operation and chemical control methods. Standards appear to have fallen slightly to just under 50% for the year.

The fact that the scores from this indicator have not moved significantly over the last 7 years may reflect consistencies in specification during that period, but it may also show that whereas the general level of investment in street scene activities has tended to rise over the past few years, this has not been reflected in commensurate investment in parks and open spaces. The service represents good value for money, but there is a need to consider the longer term requirements in terms of service standards.

The number of hectares of public open space maintained per 1,000 population (PI 30) has reduced by 3.2% over the past year. Since 2001-02, it has reduced from 4.25 hectares to 3.99 hectares, a reduction of 6.1%. There is a wide variation in the individual scores ranging between 2 hectares and nearly 8 hectares per 1,000 population in 2006-07. The general reduction, could be due to a move to less maintenance of open space and more natural growth or a reduction in the amount of park land and open space being managed possibly evidenced by housing stock transfer for example.

The number of dog fouling penalty notices issued (PI 36) has been tracked for 3 years and increased from an average of 21.57 to 34.39 between 2004-05 and 2005-06. Last year, the figure fell to 30.22. This could reflect a focus upon education within councils rather than on enforcement. Dog fouling remains one of the key issues noted by citizens responding to surveys and councils can not afford to ignore it.

The results for the customer satisfaction surveys performance indicator (PI 22) have reduced from 53.12% in 2005/06 to 50.68% in 2006/07 which does link in with the fall in standards (PI 23). This is in contrast to national figures collected as part of the BVPI set noted later in this summary but it remains a concern that this score is falling and that this score is the lowest recorded in this PI since 2000/01.

4. Interpretation of Data

Costs are being contained, whilst productivity seems to be increasing. The year on year improvements in quality assurance/consultation and human resources/people management indicators show that even though costs are being controlled staff development and quality are continuing to improve.

One area of concern for 2006/7 is the reduced level of customer satisfaction. Methods of gathering customer satisfaction information are difficult to put into practice and can be expensive. However they provide invaluable evidence of support for the service and highlight areas of future focus for improvement and as such must be incorporated into the service. There is a common acceptance that customer satisfaction is the most important measure of performance and justification for a service and poor scores in this area can not be ignored.

The National Audit Office study on enhancing urban green space for the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) was published in 2006. This study recommended an increased focus on measuring efficiency across the industry as a whole and developing a national performance framework within which this can be evaluated. Performance Networks with its comprehensive suite of indicators is ideal to contribute to such a national performance framework through the continuing provision of important efficiency and productivity based information.

5. Future focus of performance management in the parks, open spaces and horticultural services sector

Government considered that performance management arrangements have in the main been successfully embedded into local government. As part of the Best Value agenda, it was considered a vital tool to help improve the quality of public services. One implication over recent years has been a general move to lessen the amount of performance measurement which has to be reported back to Government as well as a reduction in terms of audit and inspection of the better performing local authorities.

This focus has been consistent across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the different contexts in each country. The focus on accurate and robust data is important but is seen as only the first stage in a performance management framework. Data must be used to track performance, inform priorities, highlight particular issues and direct resources. There is also a responsibility on local authorities to inform people about the level of performance so they are aware of changes and can make the link between how the council is managing and providing services and what they are experiencing as service users.

The need to consider outcomes, reflecting the impact on people's lives of services provided, as part of a performance management framework (as well as inputs and outputs) has gained momentum. As such, the performance networks templates will be developed further to incorporate more outcome focused performance indicators as they arise.

The move towards more regular performance management reports has fuelled a call for more frequency in comparison across the local authority family. The practicalities of developing performance networks in this way will also be investigated.

The requirement to collect, analyse and compare performance will remain with local authorities meaning the benefits of using benchmarking arrangements such as those provided by performance networks will continue to increase.

There is an impact from existence and management of trees, shrubs, plants and turf on climate change. The way parks and open spaces are managed and developed will contribute to climate change on a cumulative basis. Needless to say the effects of climate change such as warmer, dryer weather in summer and wetter winters will impact on the types of plants grown and the duration of the growing season. Collecting data on these issues would provide an evidence base for helping to manage these issues and may be an issue for consideration by PN members in future.

6. APSE comment

Parks, open spaces and horticultural services are under pressure to make savings and efficiencies as all other council provided services are. There is evidence that those services taking part in APSE Performance Networks are doing just that but it is a pressure that will remain in future years. Such pressure could have an impact on the quality and standards within the parks and open spaces and on the other elements of the service such as education and engagement.

There is a trend to introduce park rangers with a role which includes maintenance, education and enforcement and is a move which reflects the higher priority parks and open spaces have within local and central government. Best performers have learned to work with community groups and schools to make the most of this asset and encourage people back into parks and open spaces.

APSE recognises the part that good parks and open spaces play in providing an environment which raises the quality of life for local people. Parks and open spaces regularly get higher scores in the national Customer Satisfaction Surveys carried out every 3 years and this reflects the work councils do in managing and maintaining these facilities. For example, the score for parks and open space services provided by single and upper tier councils was 72% satisfaction in the 2006/07 survey. This was an improvement of 2% on the previous survey carried out in 2003/04 and was rated 3rd highest of 12 services. The 2 services with higher scores were waste disposal and collection areas both of which have seen significant investment over recent years.

Over the past year APSE has been working on proposals for the development of a comprehensive local performance framework for neighbourhoods, which utilises the vast array of data contained in the performance networks model. We have held discussions with ENCAMS, CABE Space, the Local Government Association National Environmental Officers Network (NEON) and others about developing a flexible local performance framework that takes into account processes, standards and outcomes. An interim report was produced in July 2007, providing comparative data on a range of services and a pilot scheme with 4 local authorities is currently underway.

Phil Brennan

Principal Advisor, APSE