



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 liveability, leisure, health and environmental objectives of local authorities.
2. APSE performance networks for parks, open spaces and horticultural services is now in year 10 of data collection examining cost, quality and productivity issues relating to a range of parks and open spaces services.
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 2009.

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, and social inclusion cannot be underestimated. Parks and open spaces require high performing management

and maintenance if they are to meet these objectives as effectively as possible. One aspect of demonstrating high performance is through comparison with other providers. The data within this briefing is designed to provide comparative analysis of performance and to identify key trends and issues across the service.

This briefing highlights the main 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 2007/08). The analysis in this briefing is based on 183 participating authorities over the last eight years.

3. Trend analysis

Particular points of interest from the trend data up to year 10 are as follows:

(a) Service efficiency

The Performance Indicator for cost per thousand head of population, (PI 17) has increased from £22,846 in 2006/7 to £23,260 in 2007/8. The cost per thousand head of population in 1999-2000 was £19,830 and if this cost had kept pace with inflation it would have increased to over £25,000 which is considerably higher than the actual average cost. The councils submitting to the PN model appear therefore to have made real savings over the past 9 years.

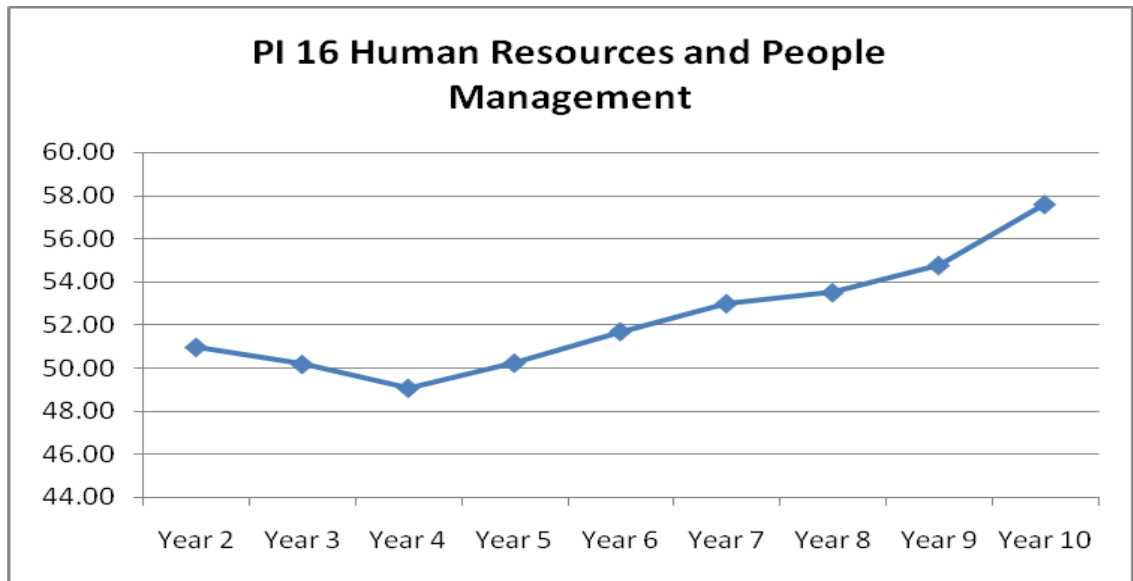
The headline indicator for the cost per hectare of maintained land (PI 02) which is a better indicator of service efficiency, has reduced over the year from £5,708 to £5,545, keeping it well below the rate of inflation for the third year running. Over the longer term, from 1999-2000 to 2007-8, the figure has increased from £4,809 to £5,545.

In terms of efficiency these two PIs show that local authorities are performing very well in controlling costs with the result that they are providing the same level of service at a relatively low cost. This is further demonstrated by the number of hectares maintained per full-time employee (PI 12), which shows an improvement from 8.24 last year to 8.38. There has been a substantial improvement in this figure over the past 9 years with the number of hectares maintained increasing from 7.14 to 8.38. This could be attributed to reducing labour costs, more effective utilisation of 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 also reduced over the last year from 7.14% to 5.77%, and are now at their lowest since 2002/03.

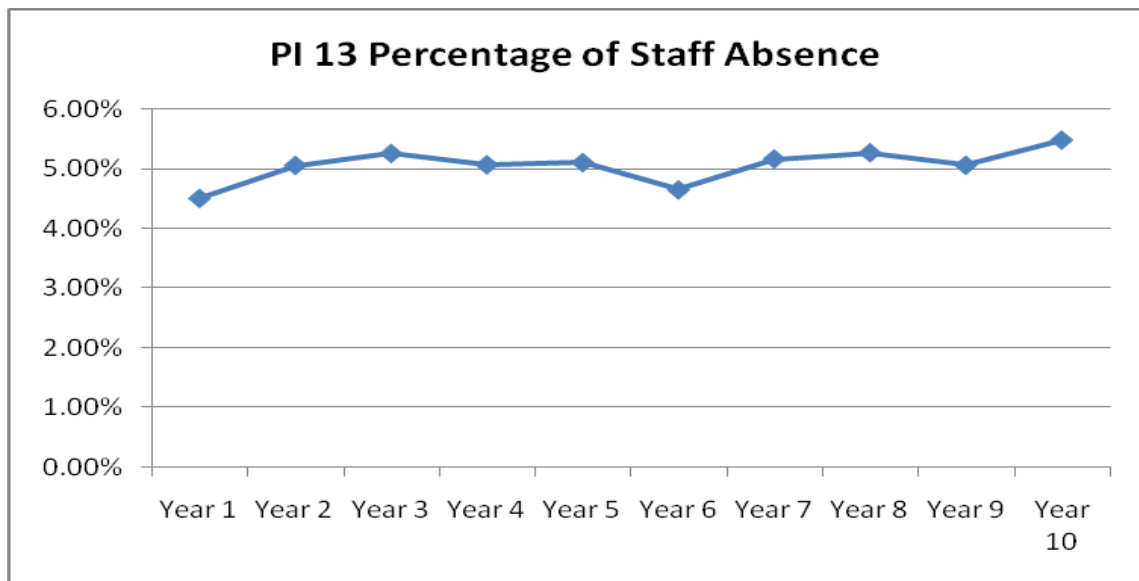
(b) Quality and people management

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 from 54.77 to 57.60 over 2007/8. Since 1999-2000 there has been an improvement of 6.70 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 remained consistent for 2007/8. This score currently stands at 66.93.

The percentage of staff absence (PI13) has risen to 5.48%, compared to 5.06% for 2006/07 highlighting that 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 have risen to 50.14% for the year. The fact that the scores from this indicator have not moved significantly over the last 8 years may reflect inconsistencies 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 increased from 3.98 to 4.17 over the past year. Since 2001-02, it has reduced from 4.25 hectares. There is a wide variation in the individual scores ranging between 2 hectares and nearly 8 hectares per 1,000 population in 2007-08. The overall reduction may 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 4 years and increased from an average of 21.57 to 29.25 between 2004-05 and 2007/8. Dog fouling remains one of the highest priorities identified by citizens responding to surveys.

The results for the customer satisfaction surveys performance indicator (PI 22) have risen dramatically 50.68% in 2006/07 to 60.10% in 2007/8 and are now at the highest level since 2001/02.

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 was the reduced level of customer satisfaction. Methods of gathering customer satisfaction information are difficult to put into practice and can be expensive. However, the improvement in levels of customer satisfaction over 2007/8 indicate successful

information gathering and this score provides invaluable evidence of support for the service. There is a common acceptance that customer satisfaction is the one of the most important measure of performance and provides important information to determine priorities for service development.

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.

Direction of travel reports have been produced within Performance Networks for the first time in 2007/8. These bespoke reports are 5 year trend reports for authorities participating in the parks and open spaces model over that time period and are available on the APSE Performance Networks Web Portal.

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

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.

The statutory guidance issued by CLG in July 2008 'Creating strong, safe, prosperous communities' stresses the need for local authorities to "regularly and rigorously assess and review the competitiveness of services against similar services", including those externally provided. There is also an emphasis on service improvement and the need to address under-performance within the guidance.

Audit Scotland are also highlighting the importance of effective performance management to corporate plans in recent audit reports, and councils must demonstrate that service outcomes have been maintained or improved to claim efficiencies under the Efficient Government initiative. The consultation paper issued in 2008 by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 'Delivering a shared responsibility; performance improvement and community planning' reinforces the importance of benchmarking and the WAG has stated an intention to legislate for performance comparison amongst local authorities.

The Department of Environment in Northern Ireland has also pledged support for the development of appropriate performance management systems to deliver modern, high quality and efficient public services.

The fact that all the relevant assemblies and governments have emphasised the importance of undertaking benchmarking indicate that the benefits of using benchmarking arrangements such as those provided by performance networks to evaluate service performance and to assess competitiveness will continue to increase.

The APSE Performance Networks Working Group for Parks, Open Spaces and Horticulture will develop the template in 2008/9 to balance cost indicators with those for usage and satisfaction

and to include an FTE calculation. A special benchmarking group meeting will be held to look at job evaluation and multi-skilling.

APSE will continue to work with CABE Space on the issues of skills and will look to develop the results of the skills survey into the Year 11 data collection. APSE will also consult the Basis and Pesticides Action Network to establish chemical alternatives to pesticides and herbicides.

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.

APSE recognises the part that quality 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, and this year the performance networks data supports these higher scores.

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 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.

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