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Briefing 09 -70

Using local performance data to assess 'Civic Health'

This briefing is provided to APSE contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key issues;

- John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has launched a new reporting system 'The Civic Health Report' which will provide national, regional and local data.
- Data will be drawn from sources including the Citizenship Survey, the Audit of Political engagement, Office of National Statistics Social Trends, the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations and the Place Survey.
- It will identify and analyse key indicators of 'civic health', in particular examining how social habits and the role that local people play in communities is changing over time.
- The first of these reports will be published in early next year and will subsequently be made available online.

1. What is 'The Civic Health' report?

John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has announced on the 21 December 2009 plans to produce a new 'Civic Health' report that will allow people to see how voting patterns, social habits and feelings of belonging vary across the country. The report is being developed by Government.

The idea behind the report is that it will collate, in one place, national, regional and local data offering a unique insight into gauging the health of modern democracy and the connections people have to their communities. The report will map and track the strength of a community against factors such as deprivation or employment levels. The report will also be accessible to citizens, community groups, local and national leaders who may choose to use the data to compare how their area compares to others on issues such as levels of volunteering, feelings of empowerment and perceptions of community cohesion. The report will set these measures in the context of other factors, such as employment and deprivation to help people build an understanding of how those factors may be affecting the civic health of their area.

In *Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government* the Government sets out its plans to radically open up data and promote transparency. The Civic Health report is one part of wider strategy, which commits government to improving access to data around public services where it can be re-used, to increase accountability, help people scrutinise, challenge and drive up standards in their area.

The Government argues that greater transparency is essential to better informing the public, increasing democratic engagement and driving improvement in public services. This work, to put more data in the public domain, is being taken forward (at the Prime Ministers request) by Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Professor Nigel Shadbolt. The new OnePlace website recently launched by the Audit Commission - along with the plans to publish Ordnance Survey data online are examples of the measures envisaged under the *'Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government'* paper.

2. Local authority data

Communities Secretary John Denham has asked Professor Shadbolt to head up a panel of experts to oversee the release of local data. Over the coming weeks and months, the panel will look at how council information ranging from recycling data, street works, planning applications and parking fines can be made available to residents.

The Communities Secretary argues that as the public is used to accessing information at the touch of a button and therefore providing accessible information to citizens in a readily accessible format will be of paramount importance in both meeting local needs and responding to service improvement.

Denham said "Information truly is power in this respect. We are opening up our files in a way which has the power to transform the way people participate in their local area and how they shape their lives." Denham added in launching the report "This greater transparency will make it easier to look right across all the local services in an area and spot evidence of duplication or waste. It will help all local authorities to 'health check' whether public money going into the area is delivering value for money and delivering the very best services. It could also drive innovation and fresh thinking by providing entrepreneurs, businesses, customers, professionals and suppliers the data they need to identify problems and come up with solutions".

APSE comment

There will be some concerns as to the use of data to enable 'fresh thinking bysuppliers'. The Duty of Best Value still applies and if data is presented in such a way as to in effect set a price ceiling or floor this could gravitate against Best Value. If bidders are aware of pricing structures then arguably there could be an adverse impact as suppliers seek to simply deliver limited savings rather than delivering genuinely improved price, quality or both. Moreover performance data

of itself is not a test of effectiveness and the measure of one authority's priorities against outcomes delivered locally may produce differing evidence of performance. It is important in presenting any performance data that this is not used to undermine the moves towards greater local determination of priorities under the Comprehensive Area Assessment and as mirrored in Value Wales and Scotland's efficiency programmes.

3. Linkages to Total Place

The Civic Health report will, it is claimed, enable more councils to follow the lead of the thirteen local authorities currently involved in Total Place pilots. The department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) is keen to stress Total Place has the potential to improve services and lead to multi million pound savings. The authorities involved are taking a look at all the money going into an area, where it is being spent, what it is delivering and how it could be spent differently. The pilots have been supported with initial funding of around £5m. The bulk of this funding has been used to source and compile the spending figures and service reports. This time and cost, it is claimed, could be massively reduced if that data was already at hand and would make it easier for other areas of the country to apply the same analysis to their own spend and delivery.

APSE comment

Whilst the principles of Total Place are sound the initial findings have been disappointing. Figures have shown that councils control very little of local spending. LGA figures analysed from the 13 Total Place pilots show just 5% of local public spending is controlled by elected members. Of the £7,000 per head spent on local public services, only £350 comes under democratic control by councillors.

However given the sums involved in local spending on public services even at 5% it represents a significant sum. However the Total Place pilots conversely could in fact demonstrate that rather than developing a strategy for local engagement – as appears to be the aim of the Civic Health report – it would undermine confidence in councils being able to bring about local changes for the good of the locality. Indeed it arguably reinforces, often an incorrect assumption, that councils can do little without central government control in some way over the local area.

4. Example case studies

Communities and Local Government (CLG) has been supporting the *Timely Information to Citizens Project* which is funding 20 local authority pilots to test a range of innovative approaches for local authorities to improve citizens' access to their information.

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council - "It's Your Gateshead"

The "It's Your Gateshead" project will provide a single access point for information on local services, performance data and how to engage. Key elements will be:

- Check and Challenge - layers of performance data, with 'reply' and 'discussion' functionality
- Report It - integrated with a Customer Relationship Management System
- LocalView - information mapping system
- Community network portals and online collaborative workspace to engage with members and officials

Kent County Council - Pic & Mix project

A project enabling LA information to be mashed by citizens and others, supported by online training, work with citizens to encourage use and with the third sector to encourage development of tools. Kent also propose to work with local organisations to help them use the same platform to allow their own data to be reused. An example of the emerging online tools is provided below.

Leicestershire County Council - Visualisation project

This project is making use of research information visualisation, geovisualisation and visual analytics to develop highly interactive graphics which make use of the masses of available data, allowing citizens to explore large national and local datasets and develop their own insights and ideas. This can be applied to areas such as interpretation of consultation results or to engagement activities such as participatory budgeting. Pilot will focus on four examples - two of interpreting survey results, two of community budget consultations.

Lichfield District Council - local consultation hub

This project is developing a hub which brings together all local online consultations with petitions and forums, plus new engagement tools such as "Shape It" - which will allow citizens to suggest ideas for improvement to be voted on by others, and "Report it" - links to council's CRM system to allow residents to report issues and receive updates.

Liverpool City Council - "My Neighbourhood" citizen portal

Development of a Citizens' portal ("My Neighbourhood") for service requests, neighbourhood problem reporting, request tracking/automatic updates and providing information on reported incidents and performance against SLAs via interactive 'neighbourhood dashboard'.

Norfolk County Council - Community Mash-ups

This project is developing both technology and approach for 5 bespoke web 2.0 community mash up websites capturing live local information and discussions from public / third sector websites, blogs and social media sites - as a basis for on- and off-line dialogue on local issues. Project will also develop "widgets" for use by

other individuals and groups to extend the sites' reach. An example of the emerging online tools is provided below.

Redbridge London Borough Council - MyNeighbourhood

This project is developing an interactive, ultralocal communications network through the "MyNeighbourhood" application. It will enable citizens to define their own neighbourhood through selection from a list of neighbourhoods, by postcodes or by self-defining their locality. Users will also be able to determine what type of special interest information will be provided. They will also receive email alerts to changes in services and have report back facilities to tell the council how they are doing. An example of the emerging online tools is provided below.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council - Citizen data vault

Rotherham are developing a secure citizen portal enabling them to download information from an LSP data-hub. Citizens will be able to download their service/claimant histories and eliminate errors across delivery units, change details and consent to data sharing between LSP partners to improve joint service delivery. They will also be able to access performance information relating to the services they receive and information on services they might need, based on their profile. Citizens could also be notified of potentially useful services and apply for them via the portal.

South Lakeland District Council - dynamic geotagged information

This project is extending the functionality of a new Information Architecture system which dynamically creates up-to-date performance information from other systems, to:

- enable reuse of real-time performance information from existing systems through provision of a geotagged XML feed;
- provide a GIS viewer for public use with this feed; and
- extend existing electronic service request tracking system to collect customer feedback on services

APSE analysis

Data held by local authorities and other public bodies is 'every bit as valuable as central government information' according to Denham. APSE would support this point but also believes that little value has been placed on front line service data and data quality in recent years.

It has become increasingly fashionable for central administrations across the UK to begin to recognise the value of performance data. However this is often at a strategic level or when cross-cutting public service boundaries. Whilst this has some value it does not of itself measure price, quality and effectiveness on front

line services – which is often the ‘bread and butter’ issues of huge value to elected members and local council tax payers. From a citizen perspective are they more interested in how much it costs the council to collect their refuse bin and empty it or in an obscure set of data on deprivation compared to voter activity?

Over the past eleven years APSE’s performance networks service has collated data on front lines services looking at performance indicators on cost, quality and customer satisfaction from school meals through to refuse collection, street cleansing and highways and local leisure services. This data is utilised by front line service managers to not only compare their performance against authorities of a similar size, make-up or geographic location but to drill into that data to drive performance improvement through benchmarking and sharing best practice. Whilst the proposed Civic Health report may have a value in terms of an academic analysis of voter engagement and perception, other than scrutiny for media purposes it is unlikely to help in driving performance improvement. It is simply not localised enough with real data on operational front line services that matter to citizens and there appears to be no recognition of the intrinsic value of this data in terms of real information about local services and its contribution to performance improvement, economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

From APSE’s perspective the Civic Health report could be viewed as a rather large and unwieldy approach to create a new and ‘piggyback’ process of performance measurement on top of CAA. It will do little to drive up performance improvement since it does not appear to lend itself to the twin disciplines of performance data and performance management. It appears to be remote from local ownership. In the case of citizen engagement strategies numerous studies have shown the best method of local engagement is for it to be relevant to local people through the employment of meaningful language and modes of communication at a local level. It begs the question at the height of financial austerity in local government if this particular project is money well spent, or, if in fact, it should have been directed towards councils to enable more proactive local data sharing. This would potentially achieve better targeted performance improvement and shared outcomes that the Government is seeking to achieve from local public services.

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