



All politics is local

American President, Lyndon Johnson was famous for his earthy political wisdom. One gem was his observation that whatever you might be doing in Washington unless you kept your eye on what was happening back at the ranch – and ‘kept the picket fence painted’ a politician could be in big trouble. Here Alan Waters, Policy Analyst at the LGIU explores why performance management is critical to elected members wanting better outcomes for local people.

Paying attention to what is happening at the local level has never been more important. For ‘picket fence’ read front line services. All local politicians know that the view of local citizens about the council and their councillors is strongly influenced by what they see around them in their locality and how good and responsive the services are which they use.

Shortcomings ‘on the front line’ can damage reputations, not just those of the council as a whole but of individual councillors who are often judged by the state of the local area. Unless councils and councillors can deliver at the sharp end local people; potential partners and the various tiers of government which sit between the local council and Whitehall will be reluctant to sign up to any more ambitious plans which the council may wish to pursue.

Whilst I would not advocate that councillors need to become performance managers – there are plenty of those working in your local authority already who are more than capable at what they do – there is, in my view, an overriding necessity for elected members to understand performance management issues. Getting to grips with understanding data and

performance measurements is critical if, as elected members, we are to attempt to deliver services that offer not only value for money but better outcomes for local citizens.

Demonstrating value for money (vfm) has never been more important. The pre-budget report, delivered by Chancellor Alistair Darling on the 9 December, highlighted the pressure on public sector resources and if anything within local government we will probably see a disproportion amount of budget pain, compared with other areas of the public sector. Councillors will need to ensure that services are meeting the needs of communities in delivering efficient and effective performance, potentially with decreasing resources. This makes performance management all the more important.

There is an obvious link between performance management and performance measurement and it is important not to confuse the two. Performance management is defined by the IDeA and the Audit Commission as ‘taking action in response to actual performance to make outcomes for users and the public better than they would otherwise be’ whereas performance measurement is most commonly defined as ‘the process of (a) developing indicators to assess progress towards certain

predefined goals and (b) reviewing performance against these measures.

For an elected member performance measurement and management are integral and one ought to support the other. Knowing how much services cost, service weaknesses or strengths in customer service or quality terms, and the value placed on those services by local citizens, should help to inform some of the hard choices that councillors face. Within a strong performance management culture the measurements element should support the service improvement agenda.

Benchmarking data services, such as APSE's performance networks service, will provide high quality data capable of allowing inter-authority comparisons on cost, quality and performance outcomes. But benchmarking data is not an outcome in itself. One of the valuable elements of data benchmarking is the follow up network support allowing processes to also be benchmarked and the sharing of good practice. Data benchmarking should also be flexible enough to allow both officers and elected members the ability to respond to new policy imperatives. For example measuring the number of children who take up free school meals helps to tackle not only child obesity issues but supports corporate objectives on healthy living as well as tackling child poverty. Data can be used across service boundaries to support multiple outcomes. Elected members with a knowledge of performance management can help bridge the gap to develop better outcomes and maximise the use of resources and reduce duplication of effort.

As co-author of a new guide to help elected members manage performance (*Achieving excellence: An elected member guide to performance management*) I have attempted to assist councillors both in understanding how performance management can be used as part of their roles as a decision taker and advocate and in scrutinising performance. It draws extensively on APSE's performance networks benchmarking tool, which is a well established and comprehensive performance measurement service for local government covering 14 front-line services. Because performance information has been collected across over 200 councils and performance data on services has been collected for over 10 years, the robust evidence provided really helps meet the challenges not only of external inspection processes but for the purposes of local scrutiny. Performance data is a rich source of information for journalists!

For the local and regional press local councils are always newsworthy. Bad news stories in which a council's performance falls short in delivering on its most visible front line services will almost certainly make it to the front page. If the story can be personalised around familiar media staples: an elderly resident's bin not being collected; children photographed looking forlornly at broken play equipment; householders standing next to a pile of rubbish because of poor standards of street cleansing – these send out potent messages. A photograph is worth a thousand words and a blunt statistic can damn a council's reputation and damage political reputations. It is a treacherous area. Headline council tax increases of a few £s when converted into percentages can be the difference between being classified as prudent or profligate. In short - it doesn't take much to get a poor reputation.

That is why independent sources of performance data can provide an assurance that your council is doing 'the right thing' or allow councillors to challenge the performance of individual service areas. Whilst performance management should not be about a blame culture nor a top down approach there has to be a balance between the ability of the local media to condemn a council for poor performance and the facts that get in the way – for example in actually being amongst the best performer for recycling rates or providing the best take-up rates on free school meals.

As one would expect, there are variations in what is expected at a central administration level, for performance management, throughout the UK. However there is a common thread which runs through each – the importance of frontline service delivery – the 'picket fence' end of politics. Effective performance management should mean your picket fence stays looking newly painted.

Key messages from the guide

- Local government across the United Kingdom will continue to work within very tight financial constraints; particularly in the face of a serious economic downturn. In this climate the most effective use of scarce resources, deployed to meet the political priorities of the council and the needs of service users, will be at a premium.
- The continued drive towards partnership working means that councillors will need strong performance data to both ensure that their partners are delivering to the highest standards and where it is necessary, to help commission services from the right providers.
- Elected members continue to face growing pressures on their time. Poor performance damages reputations and diverts energies to deal with the fall out from underperformance. To carry out their community and corporate roles effectively members need to be confident that they have the evidence to help them ensure that service performance is strong, political priorities are being achieved and continuous improvement is sustained.
- 'Knowledge is power'. Elected members who are able to set local political priorities and justify those choices based on strong performance management information are in the strongest position to respond with confidence to any external audit process or scrutiny by Government. This may not only help to create a space where elected members can act with greater autonomy but may also provide one of the building blocks to local government regaining powers and freedoms lost in the last 30 years.

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Copies of APSE's latest publication '**Achieving excellence: An elected member guide to performance management**' can be purchased by contacting the APSE team at enquiries@apse.org.uk.
APSE members - £20
Non members - £40

