



## **Parks, Open Spaces and Horticultural Services: Trend analysis 2014/15**

This briefing provides details on the performance information available from APSE's performance networks service looking at performance indicators and current policy issues for local authority parks, open spaces and horticultural services.

### **Key issues**

- It is notable there has been a reduction in costs to maintain land which is reflected in increased productivity levels showing how councils are using their resources more efficiently despite being faced with ongoing budget cuts.
- The work councils are carrying out in maintaining parks and open spaces quality standards is reflected in the ongoing high levels of public satisfaction levels which continue to be in the top quartile of performance. This could be a reflection of local authorities communicating with their communities to explain how they are addressing swingeing budget cuts. Although noticeably customer satisfaction levels have fallen this year. APSE will monitor and inform local authorities of any future reductions in customer satisfaction levels.
- When considering the analysis of the overall output specification score, it is clear that reductions in quality standards and a plateauing of maintenance frequencies suggest budget cuts are beginning to have an effect. Coupled with a slight fall in public satisfaction levels, it is clear that local authorities need to look at how this service area is managed in the future if the quality of these valuable public assets is not to begin a spiral of decline.

### **Overview**

APSE performance networks has been comparing parks, open spaces and horticultural services data from a wide selection of local authorities throughout the UK since 1998/99, reporting results annually across a broad range of performance indicators. The executive summary looks each year at the continuing trends within the service to provide participating authorities with further evidence of how their performance sits within the broader national picture as well as what the trends infer and what further activity and analysis individual authorities and the APSE

benchmarking group could consider. The analysis is based on averages across the whole service and compares this year's figures (2014-15) with previously submitted data.

The APSE performance networks service provides performance indicators for various dimensions of performance, particularly cost, productivity, quality and customer satisfaction.

This executive summary deals with each theme in turn using data from initial returns for 2014/15 against final returns from previous years. As authorities continue to submit data after the publication of the service reports, the averages for each performance indicator will have changed slightly by the end of the current financial year. Depending on the performance of the late returnees, this can sometimes significantly affect the trends.

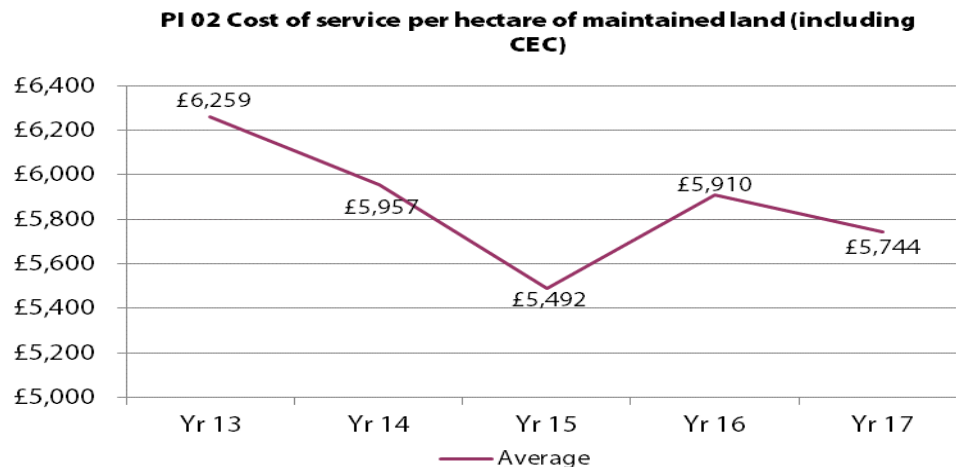
55 local authorities across the UK including unitary, district and metropolitan boroughs make up the first batch of returns that contribute to the service-wide averages in this year's analysis.

## Trend Analysis

### Cost

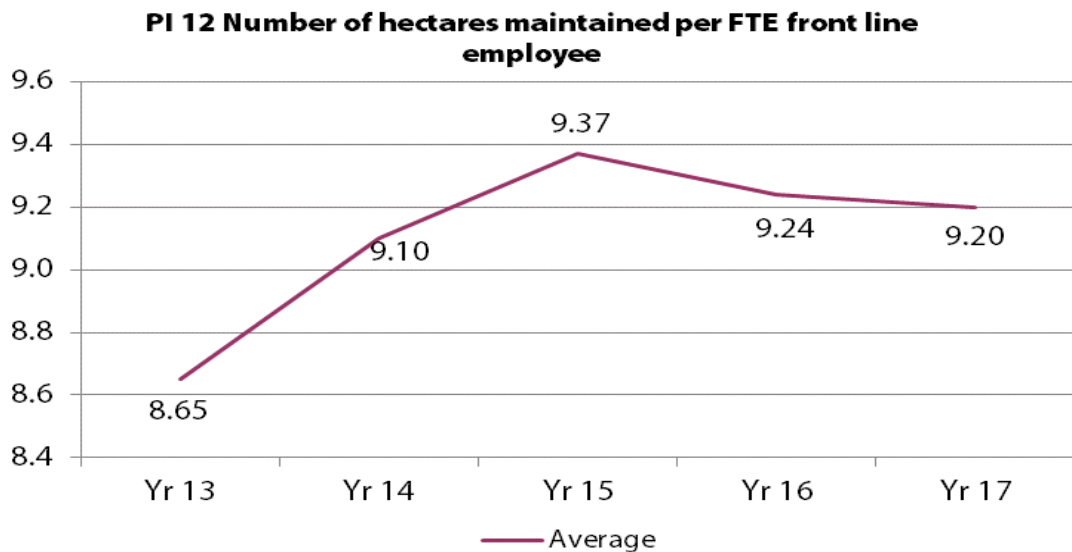
The data from the first batch of returns suggests that the average cost of service (per hectare of maintained land) has decreased by 2.8% to £5,744. This decline in spend is to be expected, given the widespread budget reductions that local authorities have had to face.

Closer analysis over the previous five years reveals that this year's figures are following the trend of previous spending, opposed to the increase during year 16 (2013-14). APSE will use their regular benchmarking group meetings to monitor the second batch of reports, in order to establish whether the return to the trend is maintained.



## Productivity

The number of hectares maintained per full-time equivalent (FTE) employee reached an all-time high of 9.37 in year 15 (2012-13). This was felt to be potentially due to the more efficient use of labour; however, this year's figure of 9.20 is in line with the slight reduction of 9.24 shown in year 16, resulting in a reduction of 0.17% over the last two years. This two year dip in productivity is against the previous trend as a continual increase was evident between year 13 (2010-11) and year 15.

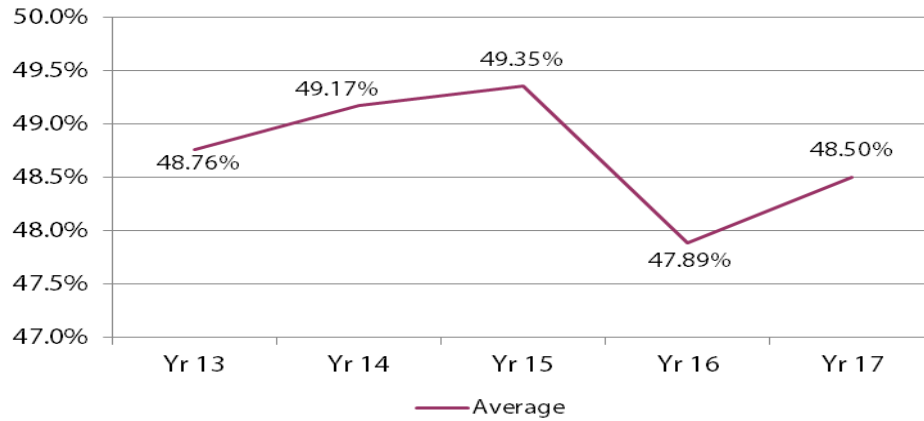


## Quality

The output specification indicator, which measures maintenance frequencies, quality standards and chemical control methods, has shown a slight increase of 0.6% to 48.50% on data returns during year 17.

Trend analysis evidences a level of consistency on this data field as the variances are contained within only a 4.7% differential over the 17 years duration of data returns.

**PI 23 Output specification**

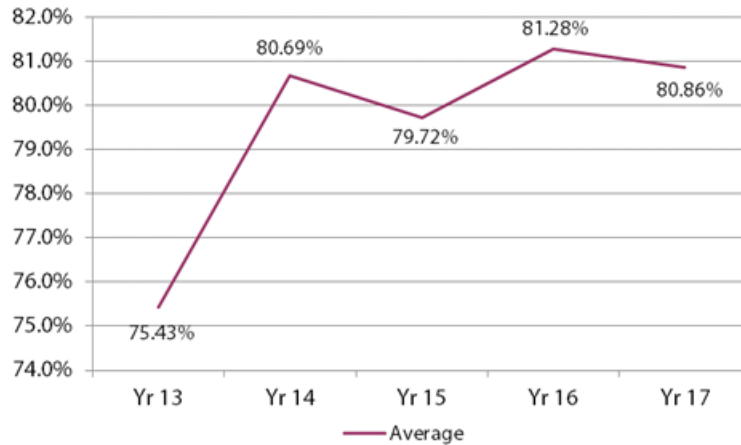


### Customer Satisfaction

Community and customer satisfaction saw a slight drop of 0.4% from 81.28% to 80.86% during year 17.

The data shows that the returns over the last five years are all placed within the top quartile, which is a notable achievement when the financial challenges facing these services are taken into consideration.

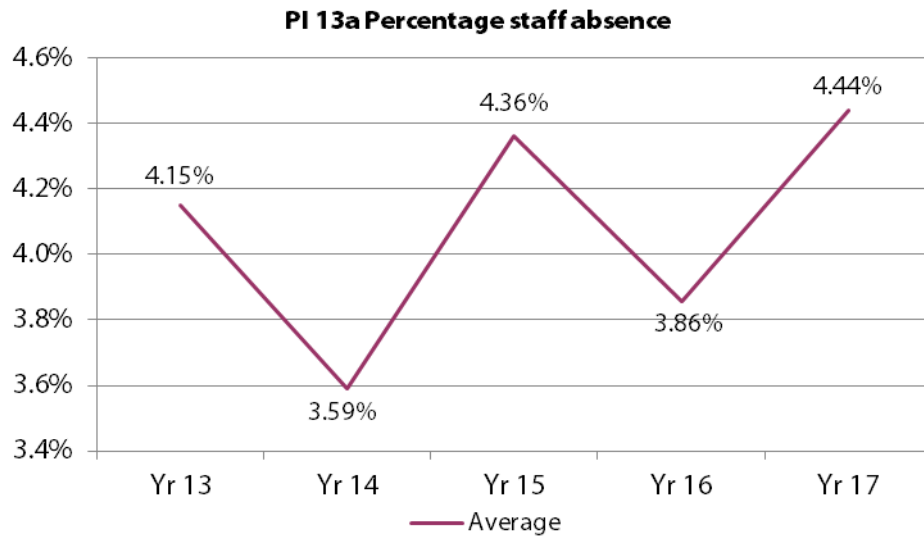
**PI 38 Community/customer surveys undertaken**



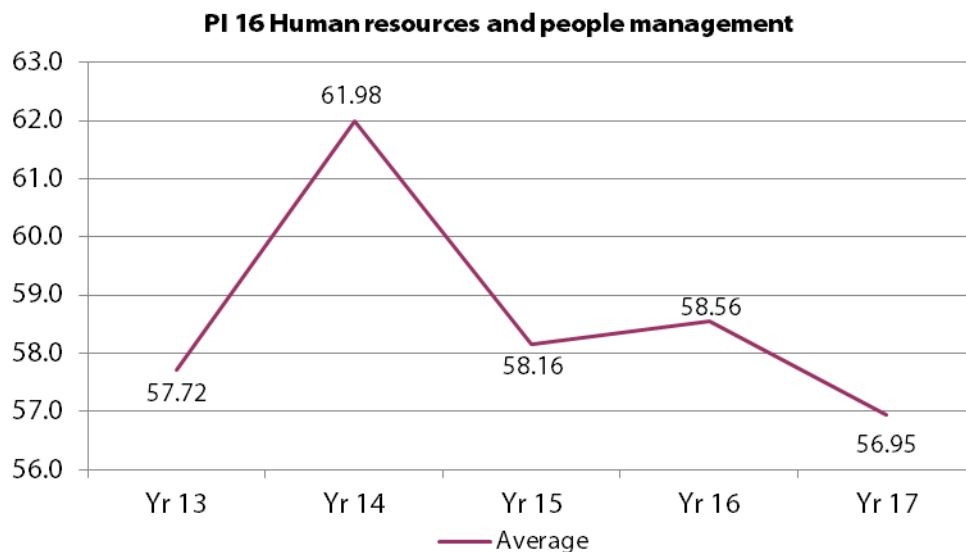
### Other

**Staff Absence** – Whilst showing an increase of 0.58% from last year’s data returns of 3.86%, this year’s average percentage of 4.44% still remains well below a recorded high of 5.57% during Year 10 (2007-08). This reduced trend has been evidenced during each of the last five years. A thought-provoking point of interest is that even as a result of the many demands placed on staff through the streamlining of workforces at many authorities, this year’s return of 4.44% is only

0.07% higher than the original figure of average sickness recorded during the first year of data collection back in 1999 around this particular PI.



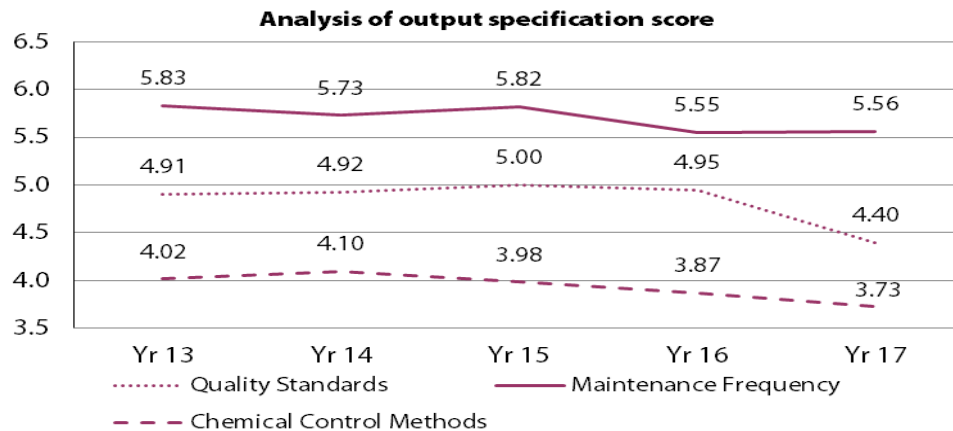
**Human Resources and People Management** - This performance indicator measures the extent of investment in training, development and health and safety. The average score declined again for the second consecutive year from 58.56% to 56.95% during year 17, however, this year's return figure is still higher than any of the first nine years of performance networks data returns. This is an indication of councils realising the benefits of staff development, through initiatives around multi-skilling and role integration etc., and therefore continue to invest in the personal development of their staff.



## Interpretation of Data

The performance data for 2014-15 reflects predominantly 'reduction' based data returns which may provide even further evidence of reducing resources and the increasing associated challenges facing councils of today.

A further analysis of the output specification score is shown below. It provides evidence of the reduction in quality standards and chemical control methods which again maybe a direct result of budget reductions across the board. There is, however, a levelling out of the maintenance frequency. This may well identify that the majority of the reductions to the maintenance frequencies are now at the lowest practical number possible.



Whilst customer satisfaction levels have decreased from 81.28% to 80.86% during Year 17, the level of satisfaction is still in the top quartile. This is in itself an interesting data return when all of the factors mentioned above around resource reductions are taken into consideration.

The perceptions and expectations of the public appear to be well managed by many of the local authorities when linked to the service provision and service standards held within.

APSE's 2015 research into the state of the market for parks indicated that 84% of respondents expected a change in budget over the coming year. Of this figure, 93.5% expected a decrease in their parks revenue budget.

Areas of decreased service provision were listed as bedding/flower displays (66.7%), shrub bed maintenance (49.2%) and amenity grass cutting (44.4%).

These trends look set to continue for the foreseeable future and APSE will continue to observe, through their benchmarking groups, the correlation between decreasing funding and service provision in comparison to high customer satisfaction data returns.

## **Future focus**

Where local authorities face severe pressure on public realm services APSE firmly believes that good performance information supports the decisions that will impact upon the future direction of public realm services. These services often support other council ambitions and outcomes for local communities such as the quality of the local environment, health and well-being.

Good performance data can :-

- Help to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identify the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assess the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Help to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identify direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.
- Identify inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.

Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples is an excellent starting point for local authorities seeking to improve local services.

Whilst public satisfaction with council services has remained high there is now a worrying trend, as noted at the start of this briefing, which would suggest the impact of some service cuts in the public realm are starting to have a negative impact on citizen satisfaction with services. It is imperative that this trend is reversed.

### **Wayne Priestley**

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