membership resources

Briefing 16/05   February 2016

The Duty of Performance Improvement in Northern Ireland – Environmental Health Services.

To: contacts in Northern Ireland.
For information: contacts in England, Scotland and Wales.

> Key issues
> All NI councils have a duty of performance improvement
> Environmental health average performance data
> Examples of performance measures for environmental health services

1.   Introduction

Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 introduces a general duty of improvement on the new councils in Northern Ireland - "A council must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions". In discharging this duty a council must have regard to their need to improve the exercise of its functions in terms of strategic effectiveness; service quality; service availability; fairness; sustainability; efficiency; and innovation.

2.   Environmental Health Services

Environmental Health Services make up a significant element of the functions performed by councils in Northern Ireland and a substantial portion of the budget. By their nature they have an impact on the local population, businesses and environment. The extent of that impact depends upon the quality of the services and that can only be gauged effectively if the performance of the service is managed adequately. Evidencing effective performance management of services is one of the aims of the duty introduced in the Act.

Environmental Health Services covers functions such as food safety, consumer protection, trading standards, environmental protection, health and safety as well as other functions.

3.   Performance Frameworks

A performance framework will have a number of elements - local priorities identified in a corporate or annual statement; identifiable measures; a service review plan; data collection and reporting cycles; links to the budget and service planning cycle; a process for making performance information publicly available; a role for audit and scrutiny; and benchmarking activities.

APSE's Performance Networks model is a performance management and benchmarking model which works alongside the internal arrangements in place within a local authority to support performance improvement.

As with all good performance tools it is based on adequate and appropriate data. This is vital for the elements of a framework for example helping to identify and justify local priorities for action; providing relevant performance information for service users; making sure the audit role and scrutiny role can take place; and enabling the sharing of experience and expertise to lead to improvement through benchmarking.

4.   Service related issues.

All services need a service plan which can identify the requirements for a service for the coming year and further into the future, set targets and explain how it fits into the wider perspective of the organisation.

There needs to be collection and analysis of data about the service to identify how well it is performing for management purposes, provide some context for those in an audit or scrutiny role to assess how well it is meeting its objectives and to keep the public informed.

The DoE has consulted on a number of existing performance indicators as the first step in establishing a set of measures for local government but they are limited to waste services, economic development and planning. Also a range of information is collected and submitted to government departments form local authorities but not as formal performance measures.

Any measures should address a number of issues including those at the service level which will lead to improvements in performance, inform internal managers and enable benchmarking.

The APSE Performance Networks templates report on a number of measures which cover the productivity, cost and efficiency of services. A number of examples from the environmental health template is provided below.

4.1   Environmental Health

Cost	PI 40 Total cost of Environmental Health service (management, operational staff, admin staff, transport, premises, supplies & services, sub contractors, departmental admin, Income)
	PI 41 table Net cost by service areas
Income	PI 05 Total income as a percentage of total expenditure
Staff	PI 03 Total staff cost as a percentage of total expenditure
Satisfaction	PI 06 Customer satisfaction index
Food Hygiene	PI 12 Total number of inspections (category A - E premises) per FTE
	PI 14 Percentage of food premises assessed and awarded a pass under FHIS
	PI 16a No of food hygiene complaints (excluding food poisoning) per 1,000 premises
Food Standards	PI 18 Total number of category A and B premises per FTE
	PI 19 Total number of inspections (category A, B and C premises) per FTE
	PI 16b Number of other food standards complaints per 1,000 premises
Health and Safety	PI 22 Number of Proactive Premise Inspections as a percentage of total premises within jurisdiction
	PI 23 Number of Topic interventions as a percentage of total premises within jurisdiction
Public Health	PI 27 Percentage of service requests completed within 20 working days
	PI 28 Average time (days) for completion of a service request
Noise	PI 35 Average time (hours) between time of complaint and attendance on site, for those dealt with under the ASB Act 2004
Enforcement	PI 42 Number of incidents of fly-tipping/dumps per 1,000 households
	PI 36 Notices and fly tipping
	PI 38 Nuisance vehicles report
Absence	PI 20a Staff absence (all employees)

The above measures are examples of those identified by EH officers from local authorities submitting data to the Performance Networks template. These measures and the others in the template can be can be retained, altered or replaced by others which are more appropriate for the NI context.

5   Average performance figures

Average performance figures for those completing data from councils across the UK for some of the indicators highlighted above are shown below covering the year 2013-14. All fit the definitions provided as part of the Performance Networks model.

5.1   Environmental health data

The following figures are taken from the Performance Networks report for Environmental Health Services for 2014-15 and provide a comparator for service managers as well as an indication of the type of data which is available to those submitting to the model.

Indicator	Definition	Average	Highest	Lowest
Cost	PI 01a - Net cost of service per head of population	£13.66	£8.83	£3.09
Income	PI 05 Total income as a percentage of total expenditure	35.91%	14.21%	0.01%
Satisfaction	PI 06 - Customer satisfaction index	100.00%	88.97%	72.73%
Food hygiene	PI 12 - Total number of inspections (category A to E premises) per FTE	304.00	135.38	50.21
Food hygiene	PI 16a - Number of food hygiene complaints (excluding food poisoning) per	336.89	82.84	3.91
Health & safety	PI 22 - Number of Proactive Premise Inspections as a percentage of total	9.44%	1.98%	0.12%
Noise	PI 34 - Average time (in days) between time of complaint and attendance on site, for those requiring attendance	9.5	2.26	0.01
Enforcement	PI 42 - Number of incidents of fly-tipping/dumps per 1,000 households	21.35	6.68	0.61

6.   Issues arising

The above measures have been arrived at after consultation with service managers from local authorities with responsibility for environmental health services. The information is needed to manage the operational side of the service and to keep senior managers and councillors informed of performance. The same duties now lie with managers in Northern Ireland and the model closely fits with their needs in this regard.

A number of questions arise when looking at the list of measures above:-

Q.   Are these measures right for Northern Ireland?

Some of them will be appropriate and some may not. What is important is that the sector comes together to identify those measures that are correct for the new councils. The APSE model can be altered in terms of the detail whilst still providing a huge amount of comparison and trend data from over 180 local authorities in the UK as well as acting as an internal model for benchmarking in Northern Ireland

Q.   Do you have the data to complete this type of template?

All councils have data, and lots of it, within the organisation – and that includes most of the data needed to complete the measures. The problem is that it needs to be formalised, recorded and made available in an easy to use format. Those people who deliver the service are best placed to balance the need for information to improve the service against the time and effort needed to collect it.

Q.   Do you have the resources for this type of work?

The larger councils should now have the scale to manage performance effectively. Some were not in that position under the old regime but the new duty of performance improvement means this is an area of work which can no longer be avoided. Once systems and a framework are in place and a culture of effective performance management exists, performance improvement is not an additional responsibility but becomes part of the normal day job.

Q.   What other factors should be considered?

It is appropriate to ask managers whether they would be able to provide the data for the indicators highlighted above. The indicators all refer to important service matters such as cost and productivity and some would argue that those who are unable to provide this type of information, are equally unable to manage that service properly.

7.   Five next steps

If you still have some way to go in terms of performance management data, what should you do next?

1. You should join with colleagues with similar responsibilities from other councils to identify those measures and data you will need to manage your service or to manage performance across the council corporately.

2. It is important that you begin to put systems in place which mean you can access the data you need on a regular basis.

3. The sector should take the lead on this agenda working with the Department to ensure arrangements are appropriate for councils primarily as well as meeting the Department's needs.

4. It is vital that any data collected is used. Local authorities should ensure that the senior management team, service managers, councillors and audit staff have the skills to analyse performance data.

5. Consider APSE's Performance Networks model as the tool to help you meet your responsibilities for performance improvement under the Act and instil a culture of performance management across your organisation.

8.   Northern Ireland context

These are some of the measures used within the existing full template. The new councils may not be in a position to collect this information for the financial year just passed from their predecessor councils. However they should have some historic performance data.

Trend data depends on having data from previous years available for comparison over time. As one of the aims of local government re-organisation was to improve services and make savings, it would be reasonable to expect that predecessor councils had information in place which could be combined to make such comparisons. This information is available from other councils in the Performance Networks database.

The DoE has said that a set of measures will be introduced for local government to aid performance improvement and benchmarking. Ideally the councils should come together and work as a sector to take this agenda forward themselves rather than let the Department lead the way. The councils should work with the Department to ensure they put in place a framework which results in manageable arrangements being in place that enable the sector to improve and learn from each other – both in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

9.   APSE Support

APSE's Performance Networks is the largest public sector performance management and benchmarking model in the UK. It covers 14 service areas, many of which are directly applicable to the services provided by the councils in Northern Ireland.

It is an established model with 180 local authorities submitting data with a focus on sharing experience and expertise. Comparison of performance data and, more importantly, the processes that lead to good performance, helps the identification of better ways of working, improved outcomes and a sector which interacts for the benefit of all. We understand that collecting data is a pointless exercise unless it is used to improve services and inform interested parties. As such we run a series of benchmarking events to enable process benchmarking to occur.

APSE is in the process of developing new templates for services such as planning, economic development, culture, corporate services and building control for use in Northern Ireland.

Bearing in mind the amount of work involved in establishing and developing the new councils, re-inventing the wheel in terms of performance improvement and benchmarking is not an option in Northern Ireland.

APSE has already run workshops for leisure managers, environmental services managers and corporate services managers and is now developing NI specific templates to monitor these services. We will continue to do this and engage with our members in NI to drive this agenda forward.

Phil Brennan
Principal Advisor