



Response to Draft Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

1. APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) represents council officers and members involved in the management and provision of quality public services. APSE's mission statement positions the organisation as "networking organisation which consults, develops, promotes and advises on best practice in the delivery of public services". APSE is currently working with almost 300 authorities within the United Kingdom. APSE members are local authorities and a small number of other public service providers. We engage with all local authorities in Northern Ireland and we run the largest public sector performance management and benchmarking model in the UK and probably Europe, Performance Networks.

2. Consultation questions

2.1 Question 1. Do you agree with the proposed performance indicators and standards for councils from April 2015?

The set of performance indicators noted are appropriate as part of a set of indicators for economic development, planning and waste management in the new councils.

2.2 Economic Development

Indicator

ED1 – the number of jobs promoted through business start-up activity.

There have historically been problems identifying performance measures which accurately track the outcomes of economic development services. New jobs being created, the take up of land allocated for industrial or commercial use, the number of business start-ups or the amount of investment in existing businesses are all measures used. However they are unlikely to be outcomes which will happen solely as a direct result of locally provided economic development services or initiatives. Local factors outside of the influence or remit of the economic development service will have an impact. Other factors such as the state of the wider and national economy, investment decisions made elsewhere and access to bank funding will clearly be influential. As a result it is difficult to identify indicators which reflect the performance of economic development services only

Nonetheless the measure noted is relevant.

This is a measure of activity in the area more than it is a measure of the output of the economic development service provided by the local authority. Measures such as the one identified by the Department are best to monitor the economic circumstances in a locality but should not be mixed up with measures which track the performance of the service alone.

Standards

EDS 1 To promote the following number of jobs through business start-up activity.

A standard is required and this is a relevant one to use.

There is an issue of clarity over use of the term 'promoted' – if it means 'created' then the wording should be changed or guidance should be provided giving an explanation. This will be of relevance for members of the public using the data.

For future consideration

The measures and figures quoted as standards are an adequate place to start. However, over time further measures need to be included that can track for example, the cost of the service to the rate payer, effectiveness of the service productivity and satisfaction levels.

Possible indicators to be used in future:-

- Number of jobs created
- Number of business start-ups
- Levels of training course take-up
- 16-18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Working age people claiming out of work benefits in the worst performing neighbourhoods
- Number of relevant planning applications
- Number of enquiries relating to inward investment
- Number of redundancies
- Cost of the service – 'total cost' and 'per head of population'

2.3 Planning

Indicators

P1 – the number of major planning applications processed.

P2 – the number of local planning applications processed.

P3 – the progress of enforcement cases progressed.

Area planning and development control have a significant impact upon the built environment and the activities which take place within it. However, the 3 indicators noted in the document are measures of the process. The administrative process for dealing with planning applications includes an application form and associated papers/plans; schedules for planning committee meetings; consultation exercises; publicity requirements; and a series of internal checks for highways, access, drainage, easements and other issues as well as dealing with objections and possible appeals. It is necessary to track speed with which the process works as this is of importance to the applicant and can mean the difference between a scheme going ahead or not.

As such the indicators noted are valid measures of the planning process but only as measures of the administrative element of it.

Standards

PS 1 Major applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 30 weeks.

PS 2 Local applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 15 weeks.

PS 3 70% of all enforcement cases progressed to target conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint

Using an average number of weeks to process applications as a performance measure is a common approach but it does hide the extremes of performance. If a small number of local applications take a very long time process (e.g. 30 weeks), they can be hidden by a large number of applications being processed within the time limit. Therefore although it is appropriate to use an average number of weeks to track performance, a cut-off date should also be used.

The measure might read as follows:-

PS 1 Major applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 30 weeks *whilst no application should take more than 45 weeks.*

PS 2 Local applications processed from date valid to decision or withdrawal within an average of 15 weeks *whilst no application should take more than 23 weeks.*

PS 3 70% of all enforcement cases progressed to target conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint *whilst no case should take longer than 59 weeks.*

The text in italics are figures add a further 50% to the 30 / 15 / 39 week figures to highlight the issue.

The rate at which applications can be completed is dependent upon the rate at which they are made. However, it is also dependent upon the number already in the system when it commences. As such any historic applications already in the pipeline at the point when the service transfers should be taken into consideration. These applications will tie up resources which are handling incoming applications so it is important to understand the workload at the start of the measurement period as this will have an impact on the performance of the service as it commences. As such there may be a significant change in performance levels as time passes. As applications transfer over with the services on Vesting day, the early performance figures will be as representative of the Department's planning service as they will be of the council's planning service. This must be borne in mind when considering the performance figures.

For future consideration

Pre-application meetings are a standard part of the planning application process and can save a lot of time and effort for applicants, officers and councillors. Officers need to let potential applicants know they are willing to undertake pre-applications discussions, organise themselves so that they can meet applicants at convenient times and track how useful they are. One measure would be to track the percentage of applications where a pre-application meeting took place and the application was refused. The aim would be to get this figure as close to zero as possible. It will not be the case that every pre-application discussion will lead to a permission but the officers should be able to provide enough advice prior to the formal application process commencing to have an impact on the outcome of the percentage of applications overall. This is one example where a new performance measure could be introduced, worded as follows:-

- Percentage of applications where a pre-application meeting took place and the application was refused

Other indicators might include

- Percentage of applications approved – by type (e.g. commercial, renewable energy, listed buildings, outline applications)
- Percentage of applications withdrawn before decision
- Customer satisfaction with the service
- Cost of the service – per 1000 population; per application.

2.4 Waste Management

Indicator

W1- the percentage of household waste collected by district councils that is sent for recycling (including waste prepared for reuse).

W2- the amount (tonnage) of biodegradable Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste that is landfilled.

W3 - the amount (tonnage) of Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste arisings.

It is important to focus on the 3 issues of total waste arisings, recyclables and biodegradable waste.

W3 is an appropriate performance indicator to use and W1 as a percentage of the total amount of waste is relevant.

Tracking biodegradable waste is a relevant but the following performance indicators should be used: -

1. The percentage of the total amount of Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste arisings which are biodegradable.

This indicator will identify the proportion of the total waste arisings which are biodegradable (rather than a tonnage figure) and it reflects the effort made by the local authority to separate this important element of waste.

2. The percentage of the above which are sent to landfill

This indicator will reflect the proportion of biodegradable waste which is landfilled once the council has gone through the process of separating it.

Using tonnages in W3 masks any changes which might occur in the total. The same method of collection should be used for both recyclable and biodegradable waste.

In terms of benchmarking, collating both totals and percentages is a beneficial exercise.

Standards

WS1 To landfill no more than the following tonnages of biodegradable Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste.

The standard provided give no context about the total amount of arisings.. If the indicator is to be used in future it will not take account of changes in the total collected each year and so should be a percentage figure. This can be used from year to year rather than using an actual tonnage figure.

For future consideration

There are established performance indicators used in waste management including

- Cost of refuse collection service per household - including or excluding landfill tax and waste disposal
- Net cost of recycling per household
- Total labour costs as a percentage of total expenditure on waste collection (excluding waste disposal costs)
- Transport cost as a percentage of total expenditure on waste collection (excluding waste disposal costs)
- Average cost per front line vehicle
- Missed collections per 100,000 collections
- Average number of lifts per collection round
- Litres of fuel used annually in refuse collection vehicles per 1, 000 head of population

3. Question 2. Do you think that the proposed performance indicators and standards will contribute to the improvement of council service provision for economic development, planning and waste management?

APSE welcomes the introduction of a set of performance indicators from the DoE for use by all of the new councils. We agree that they will increase accountability and transparency for councillors and members of the public. They will also help to focus officers and councillors on the performance of services and they should fit into the performance frameworks that will develop across all of the new council as a vital element in terms of monitoring performance and in tracking how successfully strategic aims and objectives are being met.

They will also support the introduction of benchmarking between the new councils to enable sharing and learning of experience and expertise both at a corporate and service level.

This is the start of a process. The measures noted above are only a start of course and this is recognised as a path which will result in the establishment of a series of measures. It is appropriate to have measures of input, output and outcome and these will help to monitor different elements of a service and the council as a whole.

A number of elements of a service should be measured if the performance of the entire service is to be tracked such as cost, quality, productivity and customer satisfaction. Different people within the organisation will be interested in different parts of the framework with for example councillors and chief executive's management team interested in high level outcomes whilst frontline managers and supervisors will be more concerned with inputs.

At some point there will be individual questions from specific managers or councillors and there should be information available which can provide a reasonable answer. Information for public consumption is also fundamental to a performance framework.

As performance measures develop so will targets associated with them.

4. APSE Performance Networks

APSE Performance Networks is the largest public sector benchmarking and performance management model in the UK with nearly 200 councils and other organisations participating including councils in Northern Ireland. The model is flexible enough to accommodate high level or service based performance indicators. The model has been in place for 16 years. Information is not collected for the sake of though. It is collected, analysed and published in order to facilitate benchmarking – the coming together of different service providers who provide similar services in comparable circumstances. As the data is used a range of questions emerge about the services and how they are delivered compared with how others deliver them. By meeting up and discussing the practicalities of services delivery, managers, officers and councillors can learn how to improve their services and how they can help others to improve too. The approach helps the sector to share, to learn and to get better at what it does. It enables the sector to develop as one and to spread the experience and expertise across all local authorities.

This is especially important in the case of Northern Ireland where the new councils are being prompted to work closely together and develop as a sector. APSE has historically held meetings in Northern Ireland which are aimed at bringing together officers with operational responsibilities to share how they provide services. Although UK wide summary data has been used at these meetings, a new perspective will be introduced by incorporating performance data which is gathered across all of the new councils in Northern Ireland. This data will prompt many questions about the practical elements of how services are provided whilst an array of operational issues and outcomes will emerge from the discussions.

The Local Government Act has raised the issue of continuous improvement and justified the need for it. Performance Networks is a tool used by many other councils to meet the responsibilities raised in the Act.

The Performance Network model is currently applied to the following services:-

- Building cleaning
- Building maintenance
- Cemetery and crematorium
- Environmental Health
- Civic, cultural and community venues
- Refuse collection
- Sports and leisure facility management
- Parks, open spaces and horticultural services
- Street cleansing
- Transport operations and vehicle maintenance

The model also covers the following services:-

- Education catering
- Roads / highways
- Other (civic and commercial) catering
- Street lighting

We intend to expand the range of services covered by the model to include the following:-

- Building Control
- Culture
- Corporate Performance
- Economic Development
- Planning
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The previous councils will have had some performance management arrangements in place and will be bringing together the best bits into the new councils.

Comparison needs context. Some of this comes from making more than one type of comparison (looking at similar functions or processes in other councils, but also looking at their strategies and performance). It also comes from workshops and conferences, site visits, and honest internal challenge. Effective use of performance information is not just a technical matter of collecting data and presenting information. Research by academics, and by audit agencies, stresses the importance of an organisational culture that respects performance information, recognises the importance of evidence in policy making, and sees the value of performance information as well as the costs. Councils and other public organisations must develop their people and culture to use data effectively.

Performance indicators and standards are a vital part of performance management and of a performance framework.

What support can APSE offer?

Performance Network is an established performance management and benchmarking model which we would encourage all of the new councils to sign up to it order to meet their responsibilities under the Local Government Act.

APSE is keen to come together with local authority officers to draw up a set of service based performance measures and corporate measures.

We are also happy to work with the Department to define a set of measures which can be used across all local authorities for comparative purposes and to inform the public.

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