

March 2011

Briefing 11-10

## Parks performance information on cost and service quality

To all APSE contacts in the UK, including Council Leaders and Chief Executives

### Key issues:

- This briefing provides details of key performance indicators in parks services including performance on cost, quality and customer care
- The service has shown continuous improvement in a number of areas
- Service faces significant cost pressures

### 1. Introduction

APSE performance networks has been comparing data for parks, open spaces and horticultural services from a wide selection of local authorities throughout the UK since 1998/99, reporting results annually across a broad range of performance indicators covering cost, quality and customer satisfaction. This briefing paper looks at the continuing trends within the service; it is based on averages across all family groups and so is service-wide for the last five years (2005/6, Year 8 to 2009/10, Year 12).

This briefing paper deals with each performance theme in turn using data from initial returns for 2009/10 against final returns from previous years. Given the current economic situation and the recent settlements, costs are obviously a high priority for every authority. Data provided for performance networks allows the average unit costs to be broken down and this is shown below this year for additional comparison.

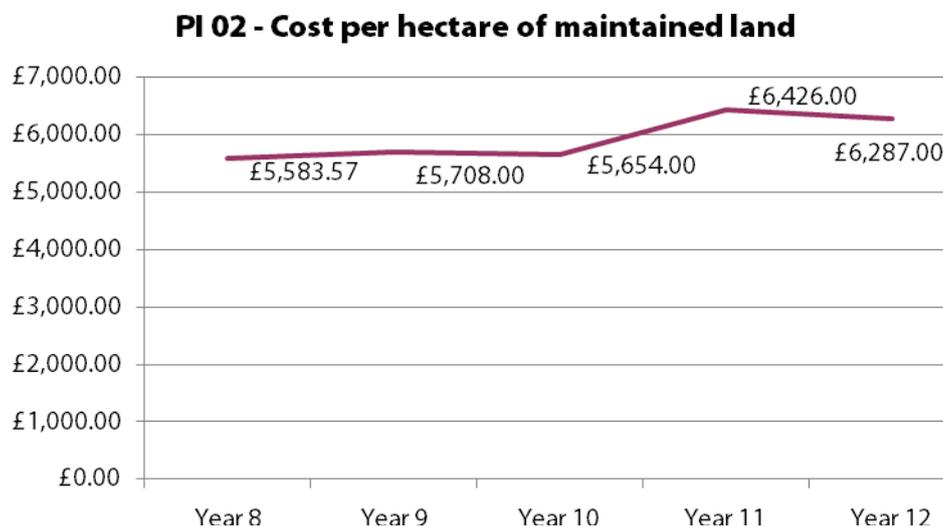
Front line staff	43.82%
All staff	56.01%
Other non employee e.g. premises	16.52%
Vehicles	12.44%
Equipment and materials	2.09%
Subcontractors	4.20%
Departmental administration	2.32%
Central establishment charges	5.83%

The breakdown of costs indicates that the largest proportion of costs for parks, open spaces and horticultural services is attributed to staff, other non-employee costs such as premises and vehicles. Therefore, these are the elements where

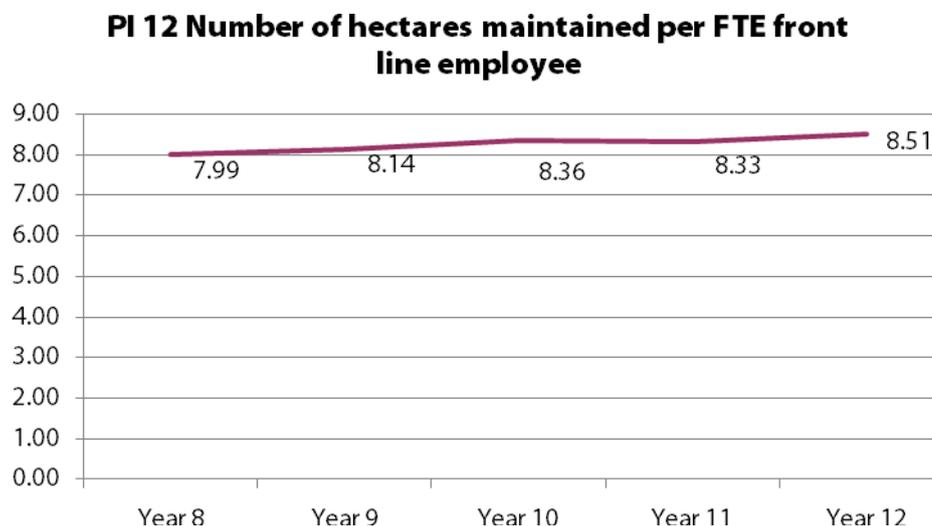
small improvements will produce the largest savings. However, the costs of delivering services will vary from council to council.

## 2. Analysis and key findings

The headline cost per hectare of maintained land indicator (PI02) has decreased to £6287 this year from £6426 last year, which is a further indication of local authorities controlling costs within this vital front line service, despite inflationary increases.

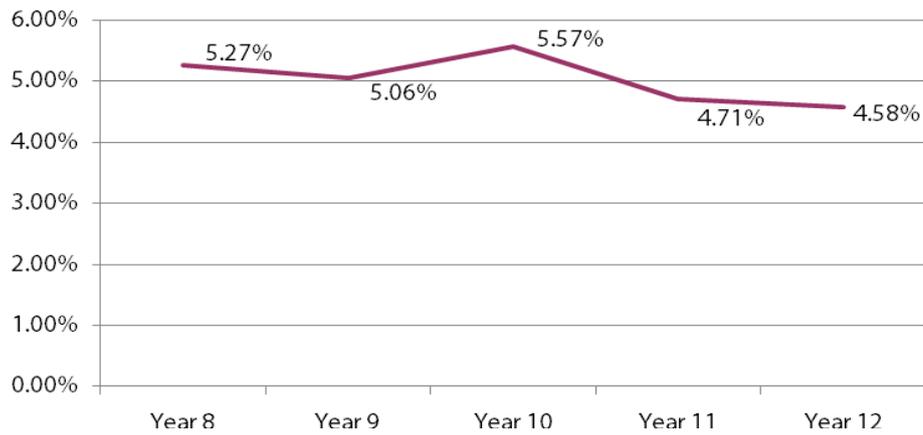


The number of hectares maintained per full-time employee (PI12) has improved again this year, which could be due to the more efficient use of labour. Performance on this productivity indicator has improved significantly from 7.14 in year 1 (1998/99) to 8.51 in year 12 (2009/10).



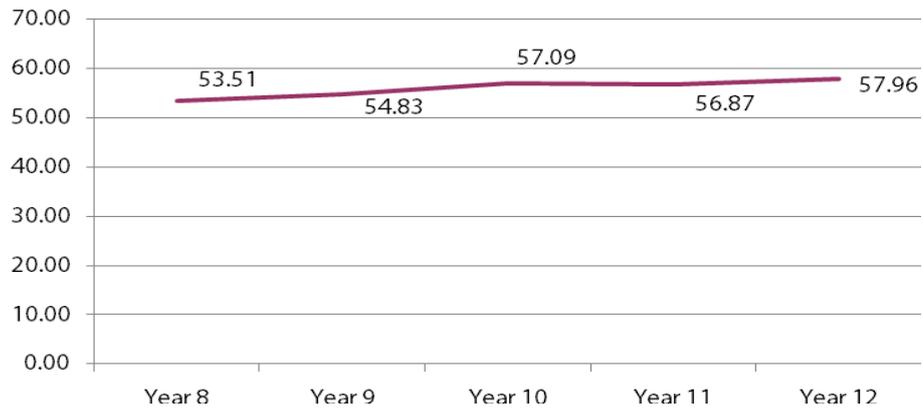
The percentage staff absence has also shown a large improvement this year again (the lowest figure recorded in the last 5 years). Good practice examples such as more flexible working, occupational health support and better health and safety arrangements have led to reductions in absence levels and these examples need to be taken on board more widely.

**PI 13 Percentage staff absence**



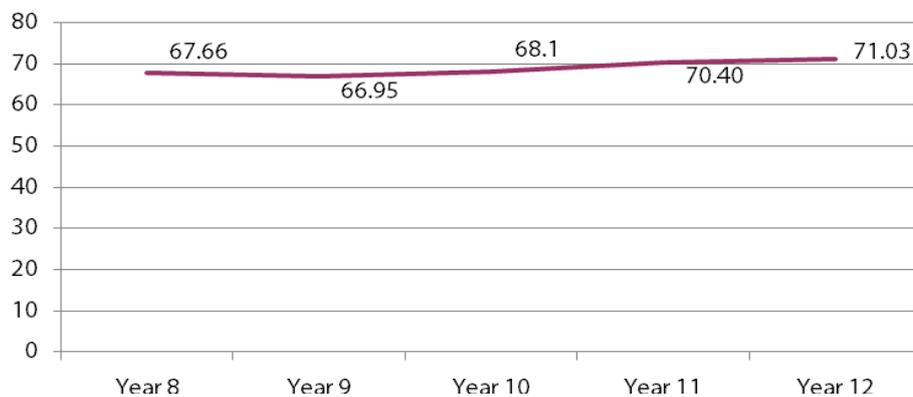
The performance indicator for human resources and people management (PI16), which measures the extent of investment in training, development and health and safety; continues to improve with an increase from 56.87 last year to 57.96 this year, which is the highest recorded in the last 5 years.

**PI 16 Human resources and people management**

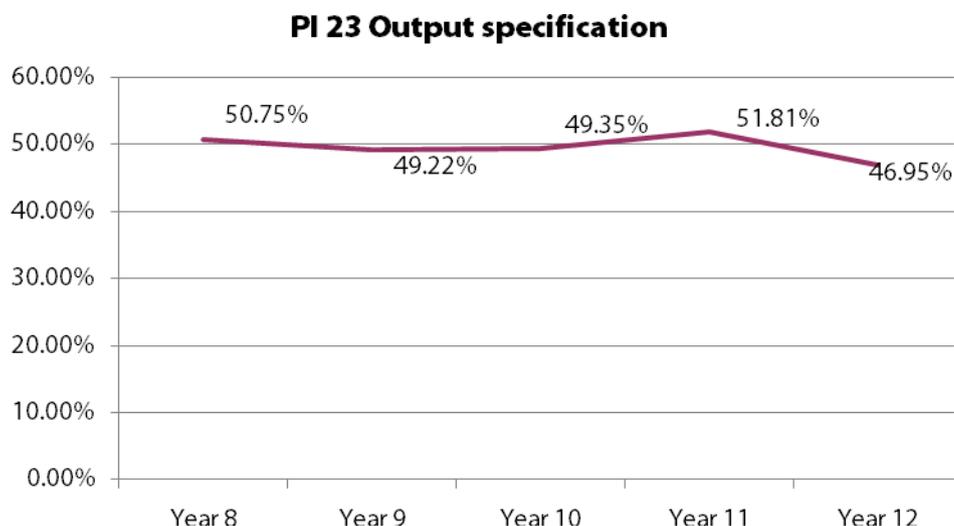


The performance indicator for quality assurance and consultation process score (PI15) which measures issues such as consultation, awards, quality processes and complaints; has also increased this year to 71.03, which again is the highest level recorded in the past 5 years.

**PI 15 Quality assurance and consultation process score**



The output specification indicator (PI23) measures three key factors; quality standards, frequency of operation and chemical control methods. Standards appear to have decreased this year to 46.95%, which reverses the upward trend of previous years. This could be a result of a decrease in resources for the service (which correlates with the indicator on costs above, PI 02).



### 3. Future focus and analysis

The Comprehensive Spending Review and 2010 budget settlement coupled with the subsequent budgetary announcements within the UK and its devolved administrations show reductions of up to 30% across local government over the review period to 2013. Financially parks and grounds maintenance services face a tough future. The data already indicates decreasing average costs in 2009-10 and a resultant decrease in the average output specifications. This may be a result of tightening budgets within local authorities and a decrease in frequencies and/or quality standards to deal with reducing resources. APSE's state of the market survey 2010 has shown that parks professionals view standards and frequencies as an area that may decrease in future years to deal with budget pressures. The survey also showed that 98% of respondents expect their parks budget to decrease or decrease substantially next year.

There is clear evidence from the APSE performance networks trend analysis above of continuous improvement in managing parks services, with improvements in productivity, human resources and people management, managing staff absence and quality assurance and consultation. The improvement in managing staff absence can also be corroborated against the APSE state of the market survey 2010 which indicated an improvement from the 2008 baseline.

At an operational level challenges remain; there is an increased focus on cost efficiencies and productivity. Productivity rates for parks and green spaces need to be measured in conjunction with vehicle availability. Vehicle time can be split into 'productive' and 'non-productive' time, and efficiencies can be made from better route planning, less downtime (for repairs), staff training on correct vehicle use (and less non-fair wear and tear), as well as more efficient work schedules. Greater machinery utilisation in a grounds maintenance unit can result in a reduction of the number of ride-on mowers/compact tractors; a potential cost saving of up to £100k.

Staffing is always the most contentious area of cost reduction and consequently the area avoided by many managers. Difficult though it might be, the correct

balance has to be struck between levels of equipment/vehicles and staffing hours to ensure the financial viability of the parks service.

86% parks services have seasonal labour to deal with the fluctuations in workload between the seasons. A core feature of the parks service is how to deal with seasonalised hours. Some local authorities have identified cost savings through realigning working hour arrangements to meet the seasonal variations of grounds maintenance operations. The reprogramming of seasonalised working hours can result in a reduction in the demand of seasonal part time staff with potential cost savings in excess of £50k.

As a way of off-setting costs, some councils have generated income via allotments, nursery production, sponsorship (traffic islands, parks, competitions, etc) and running events in parks (such as festivals, sports events, community days). Other councils have pursued environmental projects which also generate income; such as selling firewood or converting leaf waste into compost to be used by the grounds maintenance service and saving the council over £70k per year. There may be more scope for councils to charge for specialist conservation or climate change work in the near future; with the growth of the 'green' agenda and the impact of climate change on plant growth, conservation, drainage and ultimately skills required to manage this.

Parks, open spaces and horticultural services, as with other services throughout the public sector, will also need to demonstrate robust performance data and face the calls for greater transparency in service cost and quality data. This will mean local services maintaining robust and transparent data sources, not just as APSE has always argued for, to use in the process of continuous service improvement, but to ensure value for money can be openly demonstrated in a meaningful way to local tax payers.

The abolition of the Audit Commission and the introduction of a new regime after Comprehensive Area Assessment will see a greater reliance on existing sources of unit cost data such as APSE performance networks. The new Communities Secretary Rt. Hon Eric Pickles M.P. referred to APSE performance networks in a response to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee on 13 September 2010 as *"a means of councils measuring their performance after the abolition of the Audit Commission."* This is consistent with the Coalition Government's approach to performance assessment through a new national improvement and efficiency programme a key aim of which is create a "bank of productivity data" for local government which will provide better financial information with evidence on what works in reducing costs in practice.

Across the UK, public sector performance management will form the basis of achieving efficiencies and value for money within local government. The parks process benchmarking group has focused this year on developing a quality standard for parks services as a whole so that future changes in core and desirable standards for design and maintenance can be monitored. This will be brought into the data collection for Year 13. Further work is also being undertaken by the group on comparing service specifications, bringing into account factors such as environmental awareness. For more information on, or to get involved in the process benchmarking group, please email [djohns@apse.org.uk](mailto:djohns@apse.org.uk).

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