

December 2012

Briefing 12-57

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 satisfaction
- Service faces significant cost pressures
- The service has shown continuous improvement in a number of areas

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.

This briefing paper deals with each performance theme in turn using data from initial returns for 2011/12, Year 14, against final returns from previous years. Given the current economic situation, 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	45.15%
All staff	56.98%
Other non-employee e.g. premises	15.33%
Vehicles	13.12%
Equipment and materials	2.65%
Subcontractors	3.05%
Departmental administration	1.90%
Central establishment charges	6.97%

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

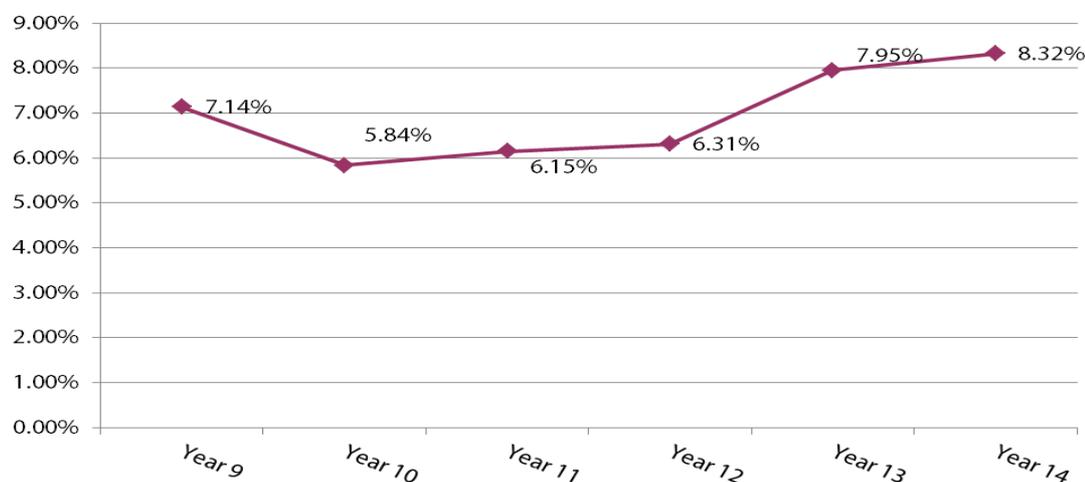
The headline cost per hectare of maintained land indicator (PI02) has decreased to £5957 this year from £6259 last year. This is the second consecutive year that the cost of service average has declined, which is a further indication of local authorities controlling costs within this vital front line service, despite inflationary increases.

PI 02 Cost of service per hectare of maintained land (including CEC)



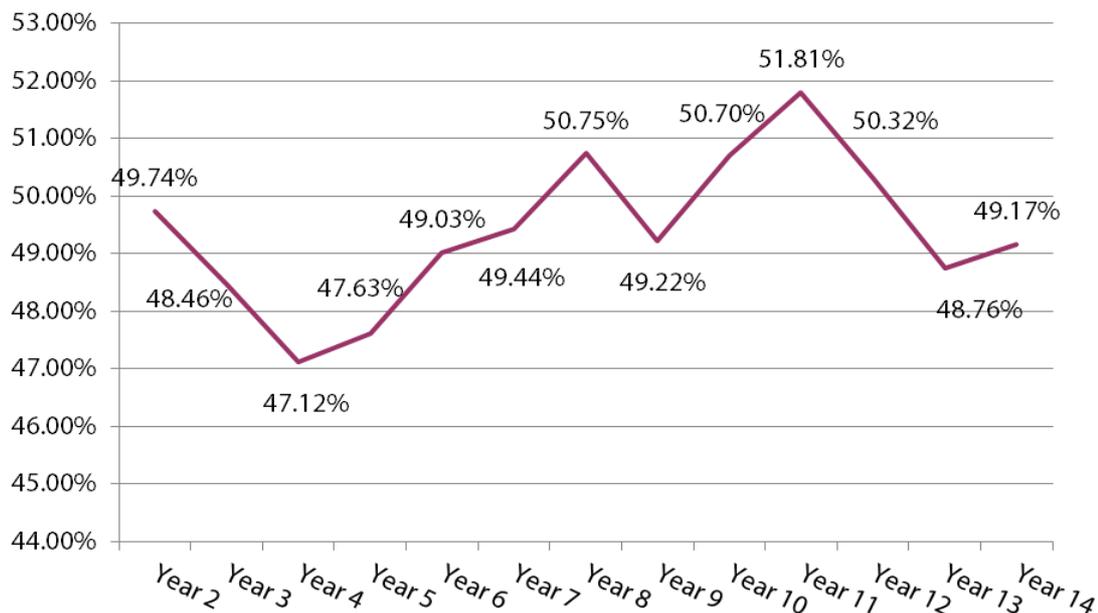
The data indicates that despite reductions in the average cost of service, central establishment charges as a proportion of direct costs is on the increase, now averaging at 8.32%. Further analysis will be conducted by APSE on this measure during 2013, including mapping trends for individual local authorities. However, potential reasons for this include a reduction in total expenditure (*and therefore the proportion of central establishment charges has increased*); an increase in client/commissioning and consultancy review costs being allocated as central establishment charges; or an increase in central management/administration costs due to a reduction in service-specific management and administration staff costs. This latter point is supported from further analysis of the proportion of costs attributed to management and administration staff; the last 2 years have witnessed a reduction in the proportion of these costs; from 12.62% in 2009/10 to 9.36% in 2011/12.

Central establishment charges as a percentage of total expenditure



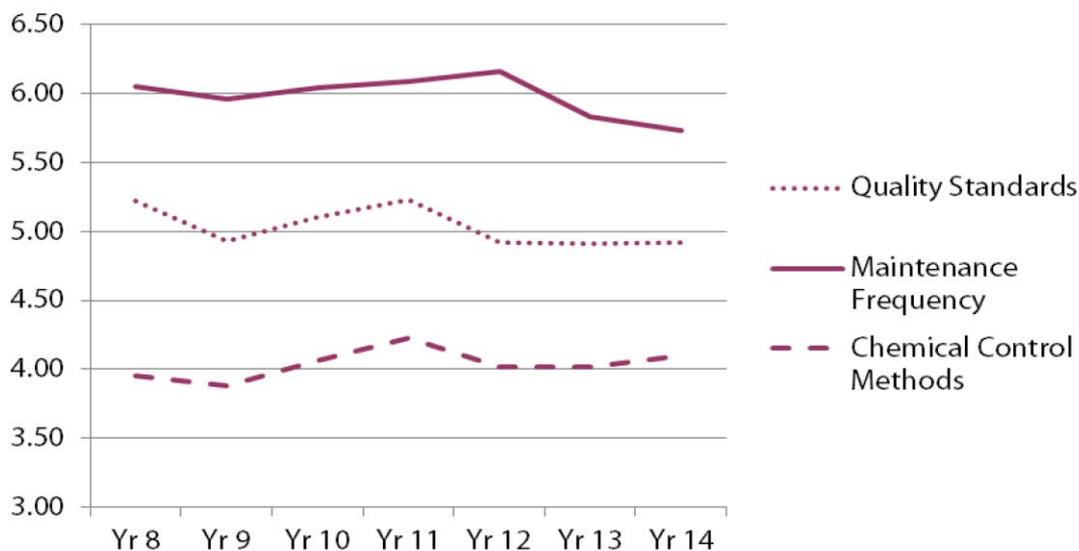
The output specification indicator which measure frequencies, quality standards and chemical control methods has remained at a similar level to last year. This average is now at a similar level to that in 2006-07:

PI 23 Output specification



Further analysis of the output specification score suggests that within this score, it is the maintenance frequency element of the score that has declined since Year 12 (2009-10), whereas the quality average standards score has remained static over the past couple of years.

Analysis of output specification score

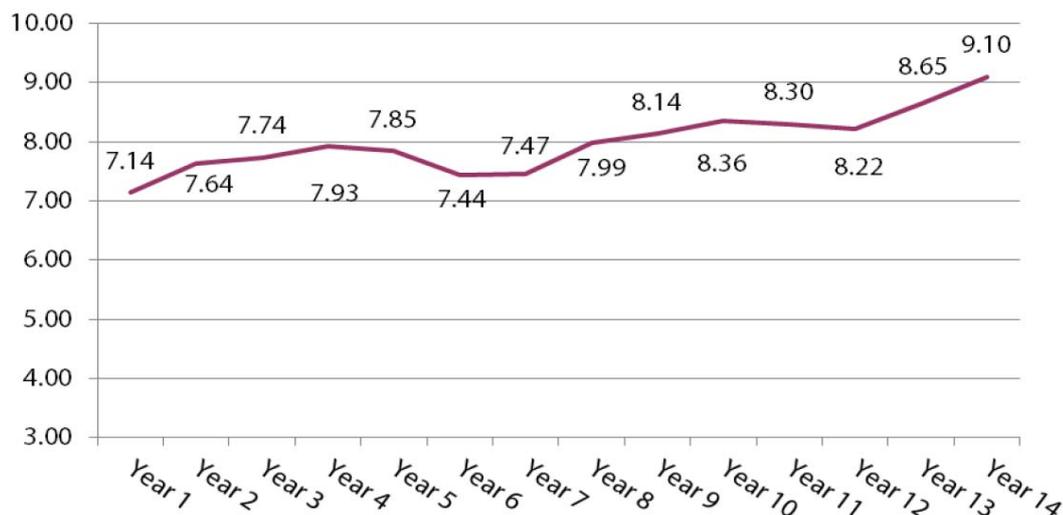


The increase in the chemical control methods average performance score may be as a result of changes to legislation and guidance on the amenity use of pesticides.

The number of hectares maintained per full-time employee (PI12) has improved again this year, to the highest level ever recorded in performance networks. This could be due to the more efficient use of labour. Performance on this productivity

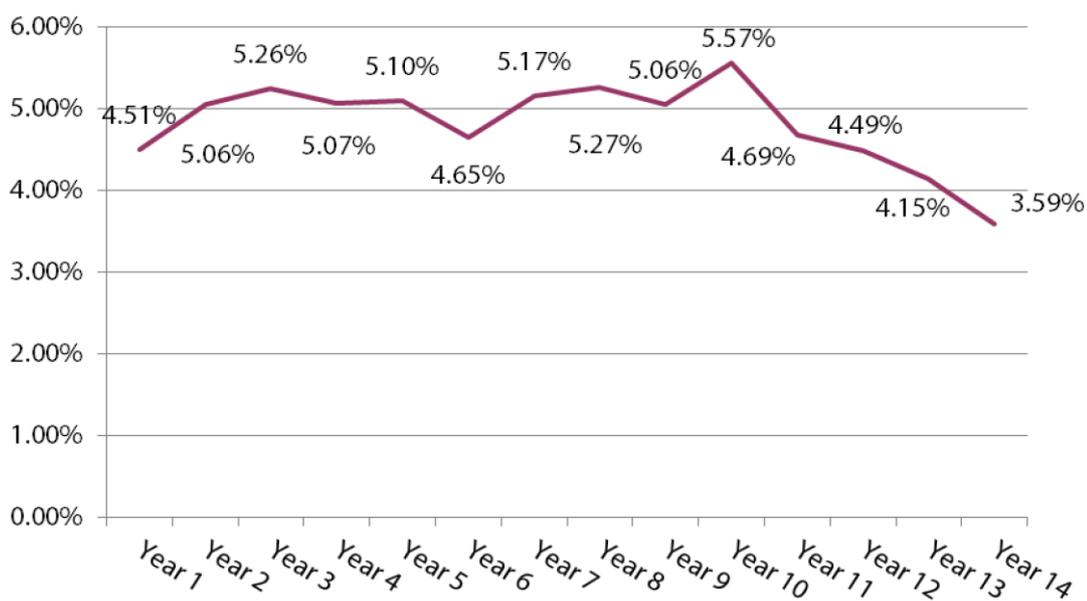
indicator has improved significantly from 7.14 in year 1 (1998/99) to 9.10 in year 14 (2011/12).

PI 12 Number of hectares maintained per FTE front line employee



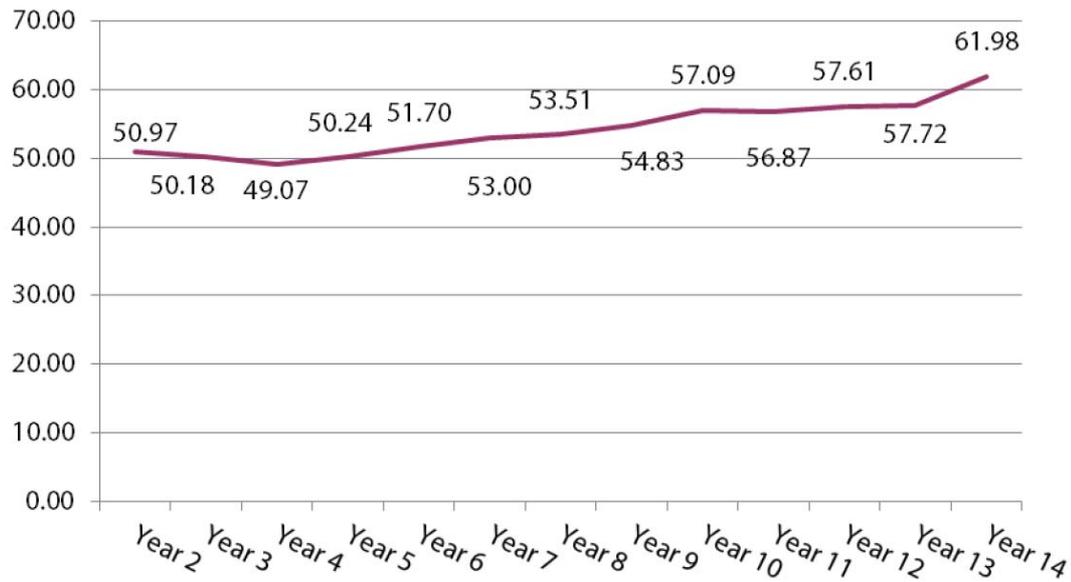
The percentage staff absence has also shown a large improvement this year again (the lowest figure ever recorded in performance networks). Good practice examples such as more flexible working, occupational health support and better health and safety arrangements have led to reductions in absence levels.

PI 13 Percentage staff absence



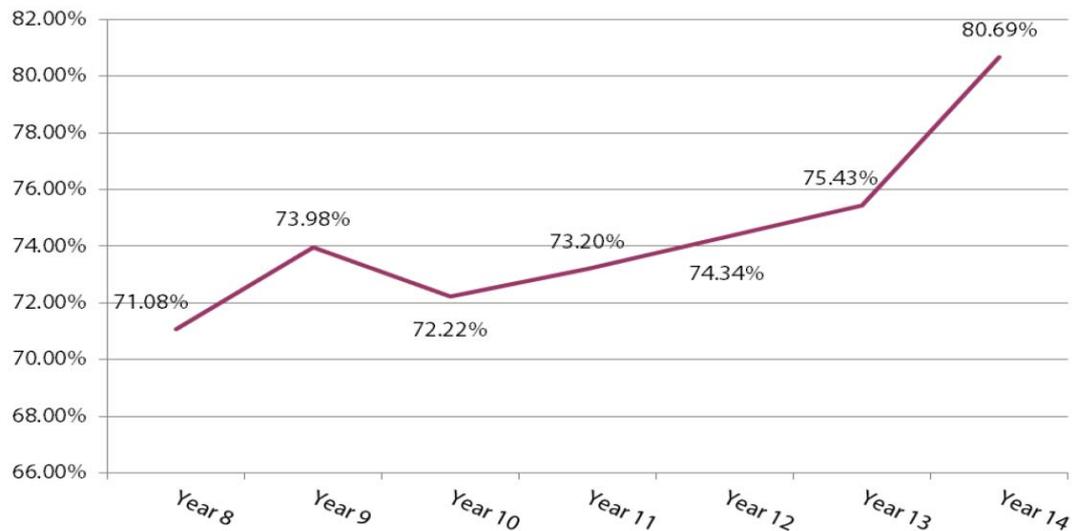
The performance indicator for human resources and people management (PI16), which measures the extent of investment in training, development and health and safety; continues to improve with an increase from 57.72 last year to 61.98 this year, which again is the highest recorded in performance networks.

PI 16 Human resources and people management



The community and customer satisfaction score is showing an increasing pattern since Year 10 (2007-08) despite the reduction in output specification since Year 11 (2008-9). It is important to note that this could be due to a time lag between the reductions in service standards and when this becomes evidenced by a consequent reduction in customer satisfaction levels. Alternatively, this could be due to the reductions in frequencies being confined to areas of land that are less visible or not as high priority to the public. This trend will continue to be monitored through performance networks. Effective communication with members of the public and friends groups on changes to service standards will be important in managing satisfaction and expectations in service provision.

PI 38 Community/customer surveys undertaken



3. Future focus and analysis

The performance data for 2011-12 shows a picture of continued improvement by local authorities on productivity, managing absence, people management and customer satisfaction. The figures reflect reductions in the cost of the service, but this in turn reflects wider budget decisions that councils have made about what levels of service they are able to provide with reduced financial resources. Some

authorities have made decisions to change the way in which services are delivered through for example reductions in frequencies of grass cutting, or shrub bed maintenance. This is supported by the further analysis of the output specification score above which suggests that maintenance frequency on average is reducing.

The trends above are likely to continue in the near future according to APSE's 2012 research into the state of the market for parks ([click here to access the full briefing paper](#)), which received 91 responses from authorities throughout the UK. When asked 'Do you expect the parks budget to change over the next year?' 89.8% of respondents expect the parks budget to change over the next year and of these, 86% expect a decrease in revenue and 72% expect a decrease in capital. In addition, the survey asked, over the past year, which services have increased, decreased and stayed the same. The main areas of decrease were bedding/flower displays (65.5% stated that this has decreased), shrub bed maintenance (48%) and frequency of cuts (36.5%).

As local authorities continue to face austerity and public spending cuts, the focus on efficiency and performance in the delivery of front-line local government services is essential. Performance measurement is a mechanism for local authorities to evidence competitiveness against other providers, identify achievable cost savings and innovative approaches to service delivery, as well as demonstrate value for money to a range of internal and external stakeholders. It also provides a means to learn how other similar services are meeting the challenge and the impact that this is making in terms of cost, quality, productivity and customer satisfaction levels.

Robust performance measurement tools are increasingly being recognised as a means to demonstrate transparency and accountability. As a result, systems that have been developed and refined over the years by local authorities such as APSE performance networks will continue to be an invaluable tool. For more information on APSE performance networks, please contact Debbie Johns at djohns@apse.org.uk

Debbie Johns
Principal Advisor