



Service Quality



Participation



Finance



Management



Structure

Research Summary

Beacon Council Scheme: Round 3 Themes

Introduction

The Beacon Council Scheme aims to raise standards in local government by identifying innovative and excellent performing councils and helping them to spread best practice. It is a scheme for all local authorities, which forms part of the Modernising Local Government programme working alongside Best Value.

Beacon Councils are identified as being 'good' in their general performance and 'excellent' in the particular service or crosscutting area for which Beacon status is awarded. Ministers, on the advice of an Independent Advisory Panel, grant Beacon status to councils achieving excellence and maintaining consistently high standards, as well as by achieving rapid improvements in service delivery.

Beacon Councils spread and share their practice through a series of roadshows, open days and other activities co-ordinated by the IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency). In this way, the scheme helps to deliver better local services for all.

In the first two years of the scheme, Beacon Councils were appointed in seven¹ and eleven² themes respectively. In this, the third year, there are a further eleven themes:

- Adoption
- Community Legal Services
- Crime Reduction in Rural Areas
- Better Access and Mobility
- Fostering Business Growth
- Improving Urban Green Spaces
- Libraries as a Community Resource
- Neighbourhood Renewal (in Urban and Rural areas)
- Promoting Racial Equality
- Tackling Fuel Poverty
- Transition Between Key Stages in Schools

¹ Round 1 themes: Preventing local shopping and town centre crime and disorder, Helping to raise standards by tackling school failure, Improving housing maintenance, Streamlining planning decisions for business, Improving housing and council tax benefit administration, Helping care leavers, and Dealing with waste.

² Round 2 themes: Competitiveness and enterprise, Local health strategies, Accessible services, Foster care, Tackling drug misuse, Town centre regeneration, Raising attainment in education, Regeneration through culture sport and tourism, Independent living for older people, Maintaining a quality environment, and Tackling vehicle crime.



The Research

Specialist researchers were commissioned to produce a short report and bibliography for each of the eleven themes. Each report provides a grounded and empirical view of both the issues and the evidence that is required to identify 'excellent' practice. These reports will be used to brief the Advisory Panel in determining the selection process. This year, however, the papers have been published together alongside the application brochure, to provide contextual information to prospective applicant authorities and inform them of the types of issues that will be considered in the selection process.

The researchers, who have worked alongside the specialist panel member and policy lead official for each theme, have described and evaluated key pieces of research and data to highlight examples of good practice. As such, the reports aim to:

- Define each issue by outlining its nature, scale, history and contributory factors.
- Identify what local authorities should be seeking to achieve in terms of overall aims and objectives – to include reference to key Government policy initiatives and targets.
- Outline the factors involved in addressing the ability of local authorities to develop and/or implement an appropriate response.
- Establish a descriptive baseline, where possible, of current practice based upon available quantitative and qualitative data.
- Set out the essential characteristics of an approach that ought to constitute 'Best Practice' based upon normative considerations as well as empirical observations.

The full reports are available on the DLTR Local and Regional Government Research Unit website at <http://www.local.dtlr.gov.uk/research/index.htm>. Brief summaries are provided below to provide a flavour of the issues.

The Themes

ADOPTION

University of Bristol

Adoption can critically affect individuals' life chances. Local authorities need to demonstrate good practice in a number of key areas. These include: clear and accessible services; councillors who

implement their corporate parent responsibilities; an independent and appropriately trained adoption panel; adequate resources for children, adopters and birth parents; a rigorous monitoring system of service availability and quality; showing evidence of co-operation with other councils and voluntary agencies.

Councils providing a good adoption service can demonstrate that:

- Children are at the heart of their policies and practices. For example, through permanence plans, including children in planning and maintaining flexible and child-friendly post adoption contacts.
- They maintain good access to a range of adopters through recruitment, have the ability to retain interest of prospective adopters, and co-operate with other agencies and councils.
- They have ongoing responsibilities for the adopter's preparation and training. This may include comprehensive and transparent information, ongoing training and development, and accessible post adoption services such as financial help.
- They provide services for the birth family such as including them in adoption planning, recording birth family views on children's files, maintaining realistic post adoption contact arrangements, and providing independent counselling or social work services.

COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES

Institute of Advanced Legal Studies

The Community Legal Service was established under the Access to Justice Act, 1999. It consists of four related strands: the Legal Services Commission (legal aid), a website, a quality mark and Community Legal Service Partnerships (CLSPs).

There are a range of legal advice service suppliers and funders in the public, private and voluntary sectors that have developed in an uncoordinated fashion. The CLSPs aim is to address the problems this creates and improve access and quality of services through a local framework. Much emphasis has been placed on developing working relationships and structures, and in assessing the needs of local populations. Public consultation processes are evolving and emphasis has been given to hard to reach groups. A number of initiatives seeking improved access and quality have also been initiated including innovation based on information technology and new media.

CLSPs offer an opportunity to co-ordinate the needs of local populations and reorganise local services towards greater coherency, as well as linking advice services into more mainstream local authority agendas such as social inclusion and regeneration. These approaches are founded on an inclusive approach to the evolution of local strategies and willingness from funders and suppliers to work together to improve the access and quality of legal and advice services. Good authorities will need to develop skilled partnership working, a willingness to commit the necessary resources and a demonstrable openness to change.

CRIME REDUCTION IN RURAL AREAS

Crime Concern

Whilst crime rates in rural areas are relatively low, the practical and social impact of crime and disorder can be wide-ranging. The lack of a visible agency presence can also lead to a sense of physical and/or psychological isolation. Crime reduction in rural areas should address a range of complex factors and build upon the strengths of rural communities; such as dedicated volunteers, strong local networks and mainstream agencies experienced at delivering services. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998, sets out a framework embodying the key principles of effective crime reduction, which require good co-ordination across local government.

Successful crime reduction needs to address a range of issues in a structured and co-ordinated way, and should incorporate law enforcement, situational crime prevention and measures that address the attitudes and behaviour of individuals. The role of authorities in implementing Section 17, of the Crime and Disorder Act and in meeting the requirements of Best Value Performance Indicator 173 will also provide much needed good practice. Crime reduction efforts should be targeted on hotspots and planned through good statistical information and local consultation.

Creating safer public spaces can reduce fear of crime. Approaches affecting vulnerable groups such as hate crime and domestic violence must take account of the difficulties victims may have in reporting incidents. Many problems in rural areas are attributed to young people. It is important to involve them in developing solutions and to take practical steps to ensure that young people have access to the services and resources that will help to keep them safe and out of trouble.

BETTER ACCESS AND MOBILITY

Steer Davies Gleave

Accessibility refers to the ease of getting to activities or the public realm in general. Travelling may be involved in gaining access, and mobility reflects the ease with which people are able to travel. Everyone can be affected by poor accessibility, and this can have a detrimental effect on the quality of life, particularly for people with disabilities, those who are socially excluded, or those living in deprived or sparsely populated areas.

Local authorities can play a key role in improving access and mobility by identifying the needs of target groups in their area, and developing, and implementing, a vision that integrates land use planning and transport policies. In consultation with local interest groups and the public, authorities should identify how barriers that prevent access can be overcome. For example, authorities should promote development and services in accessible locations, and encourage the provision of sustainable transport modes to reach them. They can also enhance access by, for example, public transport improvements, traffic management, discouraging excessive car use, and promoting information and communication technologies.

Because of the cross-cutting nature of accessibility, authorities should work in partnership with a range of organisations such as local businesses, transport operators, health authorities, neighbouring councils, and community interest groups to ensure a joined-up approach. Authorities should also develop arrangements for monitoring and demonstrating the effectiveness of their access and mobility policies, and the best councils should demonstrate innovation in the planning and transport techniques employed.

FOSTERING BUSINESS GROWTH

DTZ Pineda Consulting

There are three key issues in discussing best practice by local authorities in business growth promotion:

- Councils differ considerably in the extent to which they are pro-actively engaged in promoting business growth.
- Over the past decade a plethora of new agencies have been established which have responsibility for various dimensions of business growth. As a consequence authorities need to work in partnership with other organisations.

- Authorities need to be mindful that the agenda for fostering business growth should be driven by the perceived need of businesses themselves.

Key good practice principles lie both in terms of the need for a strategic approach and in crosscutting themes such as; partnership, regulation, the business voice, use of resources and creating a supportive environment for business to flourish. Wherever authorities intervene or devote some element of resource to fostering business growth, good practice dictates that there should be evidence of authorities being involved in developing and endorsing a logical strategic framework, with a time-scale going beyond the short term. From this, there should be priorities for action and a clear plan for delivery by different agencies. Intervention should be reviewed regularly to ensure continuing need and added value. There should also be an emphasis on sustainability and a clear evaluation process.

IMPROVING URBAN GREEN SPACES

University of Newcastle

Green open spaces provide three sorts of value: 'Delight' contributing to the aesthetics and quality of urban life; 'Community' contributing to the social and economic well being of urban areas; and, 'Ecology' contributing to promoting biodiversity.

Examples of good practice should be able to demonstrate a holistic appraisal of an authorities approach to the planning, design, development and management of its entire green estate. This concept includes parks, commons, recreation grounds, cemeteries, town squares, urban woodlands, allotments, city farms, road verges, play areas, nature parks and linear parks, as well as waste grounds and fragmentary pockets of land within housing estates.

Key good practice principles include:

- Quality – Standards applied to open space provision should not be lower than for built recreational facilities.
- Multiple values of greenspace – Design, management and maintenance can address cross-cutting issues such as Agenda 21, social inclusion, economic development, urban regeneration, lifelong learning and crime prevention.
- Participation – Authorities must ensure that the needs and aspirations of the full cross section of the community are taken into account. Open

spaces offer scope for adventurous forms of participation and empowerment.

- Connectivity – Good councils should develop an open space strategy.
- Security – Fear of crime may be reduced by policies and practices which provide cues to safety and evidence of conspicuous care.

LIBRARIES AS A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

David Haynes Associates

The public library is a multi-purpose agency with roles covering information, lifelong learning, recreation, leisure, culture and research. They provide free, community-centred public access points; contribute to community development; can sustain local identities and communities; and foster cultural enrichment and diversity. Libraries are well placed to form partnerships to assist delivery of joined-up services to tackle cross-cutting issues.

Libraries are at the heart of a number of government policies. They:

- Promote social inclusion by tackling information disenfranchisement and developing skills and social networks.
- Underpin education and lifelong learning through promoting reading literacy among children and can act a focal point for the community, improving individual self-confidence and stimulating learning at all levels.
- Contribute to the competitiveness of local enterprise by providing access to knowledge, resources and skills development.
- Provide access to invaluable information. Developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have enhanced libraries' abilities to act as the interface between citizens and local, regional and national government; not least for those with disabilities and socially excluded people. Library staff with developed information seeking and handling skills are best placed to capitalise upon ICT advances.

NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL (IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS)

University of Birmingham

Integration is the principal challenge for local authorities in neighbourhood renewal. That is, to reconcile the complex social, economic and environmental problems of neighbourhoods with the

functional organisation of partners. A key solution is to build effective and inclusive Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) to progress neighbourhood renewal in an integrated manner.

Good practice will focus on integrating the five domains of neighbourhood renewal: employment and economies, crime, education and skills, health, and housing and physical environment. This will involve an authority contributing to an LSP that has developed:

- An ambitious but achievable vision for effecting positive, sustainable outcomes, demonstrating evidence based understanding of social exclusion patterns within and between neighbourhoods and the differential impacts of policy on residents.
- Mechanisms to facilitate consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including 'hard-to-reach' individuals and communities.
- An appropriate division of labour between the key partnership organisations, acknowledging the distinction between simultaneous and sequential integration.
- An understanding of the drivers of neighbourhood change, so that intervention can proceed on an informed and integrated basis.
- A process for mapping the resources committed to each neighbourhood.
- The demonstration, where possible, of successful outcomes in one or more of the five domains of neighbourhood renewal.
- Mechanisms for evaluating community satisfaction and for building learning back into the development and delivery process.

PROMOTING RACIAL EQUALITY

Lemos and Crane

There is nowhere in Britain where the promotion of racial equality has no relevance in terms of who is employed, who receives services or who is being educated to play a role in society. The new duty to promote racial equality under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and to implement good practice falls on all local authorities, although the action taken will be influenced by the characteristics of the local community and the powers and duties of the council.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry urged all institutions to “*examine their policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities*”.

Government departments and other agencies have issued good practice guidance promoting racial equality across all the contexts in which local authorities work. The evidence to date suggests that authorities' responses have been very patchy.

The mainstreaming of racial equality and the provision of appropriate services to meet the needs of all parts of the community comes fully within the wider public sector objective of better delivery of services, and the obligations of local authorities under Best Value, the development of community strategies, the promotion of well-being and neighbourhood renewal.

The best performing councils not only comply with their statutory requirements under race relations and other relevant legislation, but also demonstrate excellence in consultation, benchmarking, innovation, momentum and a focus on outcomes in promoting racial equality. Indicators of good practice may include:

- Leadership – to ensure top to bottom commitment to eliminating discrimination and promoting racial equality.
- A timetabled action plan against which progress is regularly evaluated and reported.
- Talking and listening to minority ethnic staff and service users – identifying needs of different groups.
- Identifying barriers to equality through regular monitoring and assessment of policies and practice.
- Implementing changes to policies and practice, including changes to staff management, training, appraisal and discipline.
- Working in partnership with relevant agencies, including voluntary and community organisations.

TACKLING FUEL POVERTY

National Energy Action Charity

The common definition of a fuel poor household is one that needs to spend in excess of 10% of household income in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime. Compared to 1996, the number of fuel poor in 1999 is thought to have fallen from around 5.5 million to around 4.5 million households in the UK. The majority of the fuel poor are older householders. The causes of fuel poverty are a mixture of low incomes and high heating costs due to poor heating and insulation. Fuel poverty contributes to social exclusion and there is evidence that it increases

the chance of ill health and contributes to the excess winter death toll among pensioners.

Local authorities are considered the most important agencies in the eradication of fuel poverty since housing issues will dominate any programme of fuel poverty reduction. Two recent developments have included the *Green Paper Quality and Choice: A decent home for all* and the UK Fuel Poverty Strategy consultation draft in 2001. Leading councils will be directing their strategies to meet the requirements of these policies.

Good practice may include:

- Developing, in consultation with others, a coherent strategy for dealing with fuel poverty.
- Adopting a multi-agency approach to tackling the problem.
- Integrating energy efficiency in housing investment, improvement and maintenance programmes.
- Providing advice and information to the community on the sources of help available.
- Targeting those groups and individuals most in need of assistance.
- Putting in place a process for monitoring and reviewing progress.

TRANSITION BETWEEN KEY STAGES IN SCHOOLS

University of Newcastle

Existing strategies for managing transfer and transition encompass administrative, pupil-centred, curriculum continuity, pedagogy and metacognitive approaches. Local authorities support transition through: enhancing schools' efforts through challenge and support, providing pupil services and strategic planning and co-ordination.

Although limited, evidence suggests a differential effect of transition and transfer on different groups of children. Interesting strategies are being implemented to facilitate transfer, particularly at Key Stage 2/3. However, good authorities will be developing greater evaluation of LEA initiatives, policy planning and schools action research. Developing more effective management of information is also key and an innovative LEA may facilitate improved usage of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems.

Good practice may include:

- LEAs running training on partnership bidding and project management.
- Full consideration of the timing of the school year, especially in regard to the 'two peaks' in pupils learning.
- Developing strategies to sustain 'at risk' pupils' motivation and commitment.
- Raising pupils' awareness of the importance of the continuity of learning and empowering them to take responsibility of their own learning.
- Insight into the understanding of pupils' views of 'in-between' years and their personal needs.
- Research into the effectiveness of transfer information and implementation vis-à-vis pupils' performance. Improved utilisation of advanced management systems.

Conclusions

The Beacon Council Scheme facilitates inter-authority dissemination and development of diverse approaches to improved service delivery. This year's research papers can be used by all authorities to benchmark their performance against a baseline of good and innovative practices in each of the eleven themes. The papers present an analysis of the issues faced in each service area and set out what local authorities are, could or should be undertaking.

Each paper illustrates the progressive development of components within the Local Government Modernisation Agenda. In large part this is being achieved through the innovative development of new approaches; from which a number of common themes emerge, highlighting the current drive of local government.

Perhaps foremost is the prevalence and creativity of **partnerships** across all local government services. Increasingly, leading edge agencies and individuals have learnt to develop appropriate, pragmatic and working partnership strategies in their areas, and are able to demonstrate transferable lessons and experiences. Partnerships facilitate **strategic and wide-angled planning**. An overarching viewpoint helps integrate service areas and ensure that direct and indirect pressures both on and from policies and initiatives are sustained and that a coherent and consistent response is provided.

Intertwined with partnerships is a renewed emphasis on **social inclusion** and **participation**, with particular efforts to include hard to reach, disadvantaged and disaffected individuals and groups. Rather than simply tackling the symptoms, policies are increasingly preventative and pre-emptive. This necessitates not only **consulting** with stakeholders, clients and the public to gain their knowledge and insight; but also **empowering** them through decision-making. When well managed benefits can accrue through greater awareness, agreement and assistance with implementation.

Integrated strategies are being based upon increasingly sophisticated audits (both qualitative and quantitative) which express and map out data, issues, concerns, and trends. This **evidence led** approach provides accurate and pertinent information from which to base inclusive decision making. The challenge is to provide clear, relevant and unbiased evidence. The key to this is in developing the skills and resource base to effectively utilise advanced **information and communication technology** (ICT) systems. This is also integral in optimising effective policy and programme management from libraries and schools to government offices and police stations.

Evidence of comprehensive and enabling **monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** remain indicators of forward thinking authorities who strive to develop and improve their long-standing and innovative activities.

To take account of all these issues requires local authorities to continuously challenge their performance and develop their strategies and services in inventive ways. It is through sharing and advancing excellence and innovation that the Beacon Council Scheme, and these research papers, can provide real opportunities to deliver better local services for all.

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