how do you rate your council?

a study of the use and relevance of local government performance information
About the Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interests we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sectors. Service-providers benefit from discriminating consumers. Balanced partnership between the two is essential and the SCC seeks to develop this partnership by:

• carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
• informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
• influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
• informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC’s Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland. Future appointments will be in consultation with the First Minister. Martyn Evans, the SCC’s Director, leads the staff team.

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Written by Morag Brown for the Scottish Consumer Council
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Chairman’s Preface

Scottish local authorities are responsible for the provision of a wide range of services which many people rely upon in their everyday lives, including school education, housing, care services, planning, public protection, leisure and recreations services. In recent years additional methods of service provision have emerged, including working in partnership with other public agencies, joint planning of services through community planning partnerships and commissioning services from the voluntary and private sectors. Local authorities also have regulatory functions such as the granting of certain licenses (e.g. public houses, taxis).

Local government is under increasing scrutiny. The Best Value regime challenges these public service providers to demonstrate their value for money, their user responsiveness, their effectiveness and efficiency. In the past they have been required to publish a range of information about their performance.

We wanted to establish whether service users could and do use performance information to challenge current levels of provision. We wanted to review the type of public service performance information published by councils. Lastly we wanted to test public access to local authority performance information.

Our findings cover a wide range of issues. We were very encouraged by the excellent practice we could identify in performance reporting by some councils. We set out checklists to help councils meet best practice in this area. We have made a number of recommendations to government and local authorities.

I hope this report adds to the ideas and knowledge surrounding the desire to improve public services. Our report shows how local councils have complex lines of accountability to a number of different stakeholders. The least powerful of these are their service users. It is our view that improving accountability to service users will be a very efficient way of driving public service improvement.

Graeme Millar
Chairman
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in each stage of research undertaken as part of this project:

• Carol Brennan, Queen Margaret College, for preparing the background papers on performance measurement and service improvement;
• the local authorities who took the time to respond to our request for information;
• our Consumer Network volunteers for participating in the mystery shopping exercise;
• the people who took part in the focus groups;
• all those who attended and spoke at the discussion seminar and to Robert Stevenson, RDS Consultancy, for reporting on the main points raised at the event.

Particular thanks go to Paolo Vestri and Stephen Fitzpatrick of the Scottish Local Government Information Unit who organised and conducted the focus groups on behalf of the Scottish Consumer Council.

The Scottish Consumer Council’s Housing, Education and Local Government Committee oversaw the work for this report. The members of the committee at the time were: Ann Clark (Chair), Peter Hunter, Ashok Khindria, Drew Ratter, Jon Harris, John Fairley, Martyn Evans (ex officio), Heather Brash (ex officio) and Graeme Millar (ex officio).

We would also like to thank
• Kate Blackadder for proof reading the report
• SCC staff particularly Andrew Pulford, Researcher, for additional research, and Susan Collie, Administrator, for overseeing desk-top publishing and distribution.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) has long been involved in policy debates to make public services more responsive and accountable to the needs of consumers. The publication of performance information about public services is, in theory, one mechanism for promoting public accountability and a driver for service improvement in the public sector – but in practice is this the case? Is it an adequate incentive for councils to improve services? Can and do service users make use of performance information as a mechanism for holding local authorities to account and challenging service quality? These are key questions which underpin the SCC project on the use and relevance of local government performance information.

Recent legislative change has meant that debate on information about levels of public service performance is once more to the fore, as reporting on performance forms an integral part of the Scottish Executive’s modernisation agenda for public services. Councils in Scotland now have a statutory duty to make arrangements to ‘secure best value’ across all functions. In effect, this means that councils must demonstrate that the services they provide are efficient, effective, value for money and responsive to the needs of individuals and communities. The legislation also gives greater freedoms to councils on how they publish performance information. Given that local authorities will have increased discretion in this area, SCC believes an important outcome for this project will be a greater understanding of consumers’ expectations so that the development of such reporting frameworks are responsive to them and strengthens councils’ direct accountability to service users.

Project Aims

The aims of the SCC’s project are to:

• consider whether service users can and do use performance information to challenge current levels of service and hold councils to account;
• examine the type of public performance information and service standards information currently produced by councils; and
• examine public access to local authority public performance information.

1 Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 asp 1. s1(1)
Project Stages

The project comprised a number of stages which took place over the period 2001 – 2003:

- the commissioning of two background papers on performance measurement and service improvement;
- an analysis of statutory performance indicator data within five service areas, education, housing, environmental services, social work and libraries;
- the collection and review of performance reporting information produced by Scottish local authorities;
- testing the accessibility of current local authority performance information using a ‘mystery shopping’ telephone exercise conducted by the SCC Consumer Network of volunteers. Volunteers also completed a short questionnaire;
- a series of focus groups to gather information from consumers, including some disadvantaged consumer groups, about their perceptions and attitudes towards local authority public performance information; and
- a discussion seminar with representatives from councils, the Consumer Network, Scottish Executive, academics and Audit Scotland.

This report outlines the main findings of the project drawing on the information gathered and issues raised during the various stages, in particular focusing on findings from quantitative research and issues raised at the practitioners’ discussion seminar. The seminar provided an opportunity to discuss some of the issues relating to public performance reporting and the use of performance information as a means of ensuring service user accountability. The report concludes with a number of observations and policy recommendations, which require central government to justify the need for statutory performance indicators in current format. The report also seeks to ensure that performance information is more accessible and responsive to service users’ needs. The report also calls for a user-led approach to defining performance information in order to strengthen councils’ direct accountability to service users and, at the same time, enable service users to hold councils to account for service performance.
Chapter 2 – Policy and Legislative Context of Research

Introduction

Local authorities are responsible for the provision of a wide range of services which many people rely upon in their everyday lives, including school education, housing, care services, planning, public protection, leisure and recreations services. In recent years additional methods of service provision have emerged, including working in partnership with other public agencies, joint planning of services through community planning partnerships and commissioning services from the voluntary and private sectors. Local authorities also have regulatory functions such as the granting of certain licenses (e.g. public houses, taxis). Local authorities derive legitimacy from the democratic process and have statutory responsibilities – these factors differentiate them from other service providers. Nonetheless, despite local authorities’ ‘uniqueness’, consumers, as in any other sector, are entitled to expect such services to be responsive to their own needs, of a high quality and, at the same time, delivered in an effective and cost-effective manner.

In the private sector, if you are not satisfied with the goods and services provided, the options open to you are largely straightforward. You can complain, seek some form of redress and, based on the providers’ response, make a decision on whether to impose the ultimate sanction – go elsewhere in search of a better service or product.

In the public sector resources are rationed and the options are more limited for consumers. You can complain, seek some form of redress, and based on the response make a decision on whether or not to impose the ultimate sanction – vote for someone else or not vote at all at the next election. This does not have the same impact or immediacy. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that a change in a council’s ruling administration will result in service improvements. Consumers are in a weaker position than in the private sector.

What other forms of accountability, beyond the ballot box, are placed on councils, to ensure that they are held accountable for the performance of their functions?

**Internal Checks**
- Councillors representing constituents’ interests
- Council’s internal complaints processes
- Internal management and operation of quality systems
- Service reviews
- Council publication of performance information to the public
**External Checks**
Statutory responsibilities and the legal system
External inspection of some local authority services (e.g. education, social care services, housing)
External financial and performance audit of services
Ombudsman investigations
Collection and submission of performance information to central government
Ministerial powers of intervention in the event of failing services

Where do individuals as both citizens and service users fit into these processes? The democratic process, as indicated above, is only a once-every-three-years opportunity and, as citizens’ choice, is limited depending upon the political geography of an area. Furthermore, a change in the political management of the council may not result directly in service improvements. The operational day-to-day running of councils will determine other internal quality systems and service review mechanisms. However seeking service user views should be an on-going part of service development across all council functions. Individuals as service users can make complaints to councillors or their council and this may lead to a resolution of a particular problem but the extent to which complaints feed into service improvements will be dependent upon councils’ complaints monitoring systems. With regard to external checks, with the exception of the recourse to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, consumers are mainly one step removed from these processes.

Service users need to know what service standards to expect and to be able to hold councils to account. Allowing access to balanced information about councils’ service provision, standards set and progress on meeting such targets, can assist them in judging how well councils are performing. Therefore the publication of performance information about the provision of public services is one method in which local authorities are accountable to service users – is this enough?

**From the Citizen’s Charter to Best Value**

**Introduction of Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs)**

Providing information about how a council is performing should consist of many elements. The introduction in the early nineties of a set of local government SPIs resulted in the focus of attention being placed on this fairly narrow type of performance information at the local and national level.

In 1991 the Conservative Government launched the Citizen’s Charter. This was the government’s flagship policy for reforming the public sector. The Charter included proposals requiring local authorities to collect and publish annually nationally prescribed SPIs. Legislation quickly followed, and the Local Government Act 1992 gave the Accounts Commission in Scotland the responsibility for determining SPIs through issuing a direction, on an annual basis to councils, joint committees and joint boards, on the collection and publication of such data. Since 1993, councils have been required to collect and publish performance information on an annual basis in a local newspaper by 30 September each year.
The range of SPIs covers the majority of local government functions. Although SPIs have been subject to amendment the number has remained largely unchanged since their introduction. The first Direction contained a set of 65 performance indicators covering 11 council functions. There are currently for 2003/4, 64 indicators covering 14 council functions and an additional 13 indicators covering police and fire services. The local government functions are:

- Benefits Administration
- Building Control
- Corporate Issues (e.g. staff absence levels, equal opportunities)
- Education
- Environmental Health
- Environmental Services
- Finance
- Housing
- Leisure Services
- Libraries
- Planning
- Roads and Lighting
- Social Work
- Trading Standards.

Audit Scotland, a statutory body established in 2000, on behalf of the Accounts Commission, reviews the indicators on an annual basis and carries out a consultation exercise on any proposed amendments. Audit Scotland also produces a range of publications on SPI data.²

The rationale behind the Citizen’s Charter and the introduction of SPIs was an attempt by central government to measure the quality of public services, achieve cost savings and make councils more directly accountable through the publication of results. Councils’ performance in providing important services is of significant public interest and the SPIs were viewed as one means by which council performance could be assessed. However, statutory performance indicators have been criticised as crude measures of performance, and incomprehensible to service users. The media reporting of comparative information in league table formats was criticised by many councils as unfair and misleading. The publication of indicators in local press was considered by many as a waste of money and something councils had to do as a legal requirement rather than an effective method for meaningfully communicating the information to the public.

² Audit Scotland publishes on an annual basis a series of service specific SPIs publications, comparing councils’ performance. Audit Scotland also produces Council Profiles summarising performance information from a wider range of sources and a compendium of all of SPI data. These publications are available on the website at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
SCC Analysis of Selected Performance Indicators

In 2001 SCC carried out a comparative analysis of a selection of statutory performance indicator data within five key service areas (education, housing, environmental services, social work and libraries). Generally, the analysis found improvements in the performance indicators over time, with developments meaning more relevant information was being collected. Our 2001 report argued that, as a means of public accountability, performance indicators do have potential to provide consumers with useful information. However, it was felt that there were problems with the current indicators as mechanism of public accountability, such as difficulties in comparing the information over time. The report did acknowledge that there is a trade-off between continuity of information with improving the information collected. There was also little evidence of performance indicators contributing to continuous improvement, and in some instances the information was ambiguous. The analysis concluded that consideration of alternative performance measurements and other means of responding to consumers’ needs were required, because performance indicators alone did not appear to provide an incentive to councils to respond to consumers’ needs.

A consultation exercise carried out by the Accounts Commission in 2000 on the development and criteria for developing future SPIs sought views on some of the issues highlighted by the SCC analysis of SPIs. In response to the consultation process the Accounts Commission determined that in future:

• indicators should, where possible, be output or outcome focused (i.e. concentrated on what the service delivers);
• it should generally be agreed whether a change in the performance reflects an improvement or decline; and
• indicators should refer to nationally set or agreed targets or standards rather than local ones.

A New Best Value Approach to Improving Public Services

The election of a Labour government in 1997 ushered in changes and a new flagship ‘Best Value’ policy for improving the efficiency of public services, usurping the Citizen’s Charter and replacing Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). Performance reporting is a key component of Best Value. Under Best Value, councils are required to provide efficient and effective services, which reflect not only value for money considerations, but also meet the public’s need for high quality services.

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3 Report to meeting of Scottish Consumer Council September 2001
4 Accounts Commission/Audit Scotland, Performance Indicators Council Profiles 2000/1
5 Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) was a Conservative government policy promoting an ‘enabling role’ for councils, aiming to reduce direct service provision through subjecting some council services to open market competition.
The development and implementation of Best Value has been progressed in different ways in England, Scotland and Wales. Although a detailed discussion of the differences is outwith the scope of this report, in summary the development of Best Value in Scotland has been progressed in a less prescriptive way. A statutory duty of Best Value was introduced in local authorities in England and Wales in 1999. Further developments in the government’s performance framework were outlined in the White Paper, *Strong Local Government - Quality Public Services*, issued in 2001. The White Paper introduced the policy of comprehensive performance assessments (CPA) for local authorities in England. The Audit Commission is assessing all English councils’ performance and producing a ‘scorecard’ which will be available to the public. The assessment includes an overall grading for English councils comprising one of four grades (‘high performing’, ‘striving’, ‘coasting’ and ‘poor performing’) as well as performance information about key service areas. The incentives for good performing councils are that they will have the opportunity to access greater financial freedoms.

From 1997 to early 2003, Best Value has operated on a voluntary basis in Scotland. A Best Value Task Force was established to oversee the development of the initiative and produce guidance for councils on implementing Best Value. SCC highlighted that the consumer interest was not represented on the initial Task Force; however when the Taskforce was reconvened in 2002, its membership was widened to include representatives from police and fire services, Unison and SCC.

Performance measurement and monitoring is considered fundamental to the demonstration of Best Value across council services, and to this end councils in Scotland have been expected to establish a performance management and planning (PMP) framework. Central to PMP is the process of Public Performance Reporting (PPR), which came into operation in May 2000. Public performance reports are a mechanism for reporting to the general public and service users on current levels of council services and how services can be improved. Despite these changes, statutory performance indicators remain and the use of indicators by central government as a comparative measurement of service performance has continued to grow. Practice to date has shown that SPIs are generally incorporated into councils’ public performance reports, although some local authorities’ reports include additional performance material.

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6 Local Government Act (1999) s3
Scoping Performance Measurement and Service Improvement

In 2001 SCC commissioned two background papers on the broad topic of performance measurement and service improvement. The first paper\(^7\) reviewed the literature on the different types of performance measurement, including performance indicators, and considered whether certain approaches allowed for greater responsiveness to consumers. The paper concluded that to be really beneficial to consumers, performance information would need to be backed by mechanisms to improve consumer choice and access to services. The report also argued that investigation of the links between performance measurement and redress was underdeveloped. The second 2001 SCC background paper\(^8\) reviewed the literature on incentives (other than the democratic process, redress and user consultation) for local authorities to be responsive to consumers. It concluded that there was scope for development of quality systems and benchmarking and for greater use of mechanisms used in the private sector such as mystery shopping, the balanced scorecard technique and unconditional service guarantees. The papers provided a basis for further examination of the role of performance information as a type of performance measurement and whether it could strengthening service users ability to hold councils to account for levels of service performance.

Legislative Change in Scotland

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 has made a number of changes to the arrangements for the publication of performance information by local authorities. While under the previous legislation, councils were required to publish their statutory performance indictors annually and in a local newspaper, Section 13 of the 2003 Act places councils under a duty to make whatever arrangements are necessary to report publicly on their performance. Significantly therefore, councils now have more flexibility in deciding how and when to publish performance information. However, Ministers have powers to issue regulations directing councils on how they publish performance information. Regulations on public performance reporting are currently being prepared for consultation. SCC has been able to feed the key messages emerging from the study into the guidance being developed by the Best Value Task Force.

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7 Brennan, C. Performance Measurement and Service Improvement: Types of performance measurement (e.g. output or outcome) and whether certain approaches to performance measurement allow for greater responsiveness to consumers. Queen Margaret University College, June 2001. Background paper prepared for Scottish Consumer Council.

8 Brennan, C. Performance Measurement and Service Improvement: Exploring the mechanisms by which public services can respond to service users. Queen Margaret University College, June 2001. Background paper prepared for Scottish Consumer Council.
The 2003 Act also gives further powers to the Accounts Commission to direct local authorities to publish performance indicators on Best Value. The Executive’s stated intention here is not to be prescriptive about the Best Value information that councils produce, but to establish at least the minimum required for public accountability. The Accounts Commission has recently consulted on its proposals for the new audit of Best Value. The paper states that the process should aim to provide as clear a picture as possible of a council’s overall performance and increase public accountability around the duties of Best Value, Community Planning and Public Performance Reporting. However, as discussed later in the report, central government views of what is required for public accountability should not be confused with what is required for service user accountability.

This chapter has set out the policy and legislative context for the project and has highlighted the conclusions from SCC background reports and analysis of selected SPIs. The following chapter comments on the information gathered from councils in Scotland on current practice of public performance reporting. The findings from the preliminary stage of the qualitative research, the experiences of Consumer Network volunteers accessing council performance information, are also discussed.

9 Accounts Commission The new audit of Best Value Consultation paper, July 2003
Chapter 3 – Current Practice on Reporting Council Performance to the Public.

Introduction

This chapter discusses current policy and practice of local authorities with regard to reporting on their performance to the public. Discussion is based on a range of performance literature provided by councils in September 2002. The experiences of SCC’s network of consumer volunteers in accessing performance information from local authorities and their views on its use and relevance are also outlined.

Performance Information for the Public – Councils’ Policy and Practice

As part of the project, SCC contacted the chief executives of all 32 local authorities in Scotland requesting a range of performance literature and information about their authority’s approach to performance reporting. Only one council failed to provide at least some of the following information:

1. A copy of the statutory performance indicators information published by the council for the year 2001/2 and any other council-wide public performance reports for that year.
2. A copy of the document(s) which set out the council’s public performance reporting policy.
3. Examples of public information (e.g. leaflets) which set out service-specific performance targets for council services.
4. Details of any quantitative or qualitative research on how the council reports information about the performance of its services to the public and, if possible, copies of the research findings.

The review of the performance literature collected identified a range of approaches and practice in relation to reporting on council performance to the public. Fifteen councils provided a publication containing more information than that of the newspaper advert, which is required by legislation. Two other councils provided reports to committees. These reports were available to the public on request or via the council’s website. One council responded that while it did not publish its performance information beyond the statutory minimum, (i.e. newspaper advertisement) a report to its Standards and Scrutiny Committee had been the basis for an article in a local newspaper.
Council Performance Reports

Among those councils who indicated that they produced a council-wide performance report, the most common format was a brochure-style document. Several authorities indicated that they published performance information in the council’s own newspaper. Both of these formats were generally sent out to all households in the authority’s area. A range of information was provided in the publications; however, the following information was generally included:

- Financial information, including how council tax revenue was spent.
- Statutory performance indicators, which were also commonly compared year-on-year and with the Scottish average. Some councils also compared indicators directly against other local authorities or displayed the council’s ranking. Other data reported, relating to indicators, was whether there had been an improvement in performance and whether council targets had been met.
- Councils also regularly reported on what had been done and what would be done in the forthcoming year.

To illustrate the different approaches taken by councils, two examples are given below.

Public Performance Reporting

Renfrewshire Council’s report outlined what they had set out to achieve for the year and how much of this had been accomplished. They also stated their goals for the forthcoming year and how they intended to achieve them. Bar charts were used to display council performance over time and set against current and future targets for service provision. The report also achieved the Plain English Campaign’s Crystal Mark.

South Lanarkshire Council took the ‘human interest’ approach to performance reporting in its council newspaper. Along with the usual performance information, it related services to users via articles on South Lanarkshire residents.

Performance Information on Council Websites

A large majority of councils are making use of their website as a means of providing access to performance information. Only three councils did not have either the statutory performance indicators or public performance reports available on their websites.

Good practice examples of user-friendly performance reports, identified during the focus groups discussions, along with a checklist for an attractive public performance report, are highlighted later in the relevant sections of the report.
Public Performance Reporting Frameworks

As part of the guidance issued by central government on implementing Best Value, councils were asked to prepare public performance reporting (PPR) frameworks. PPR is a mechanism for reporting annually to the public and service users on current service levels; relevant performance indicators (council-wide and service specific); and how services can be improved. Councils’ framework policy documents should set out how this will be achieved.

Twenty-three of the 31 authorities who responded to SCC’s request for information included a copy of their public performance reporting framework. The frameworks were generally detailed and appeared to draw on the guidance set out by the Best Value Task Force and Audit Scotland. Aspects of reporting covered in the frameworks included communicating to different stakeholders, how stakeholder views were gathered, the timetable for reporting, what formats the reporting process would include and the position of individual service departments. Five authorities indicated that they did not have a council-wide framework for PPR. Reasons for this included allowing services to develop their own reporting frameworks which could be tailored to suit the needs of their users, and that it was not seen to be a priority by council members due to a lack of resources. A further three councils did not mention or provide a PPR framework in their response.

Public Information for Specific Council Services

A wide range of examples as provided in response to the request for examples of public information (e.g. leaflets) which set out service-specific performance targets for council services. Publications ranged from leaflets giving basic information regarding a particular service to detailed strategic reports on service provision. Some examples are described below.

West Lothian Council – Lifelong Learning Report
A full-length report which lists performance targets and whether they were met. Also gives examples of other achievements.

South Lanarkshire Council – Education Progress Report
A fold-out booklet listing the education department’s eight objectives and the progress made towards them in the last year.

A booklet which gives general information to council tenants, including some service targets such as the time by which tenants can expect repairs to be carried out.

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10 Scottish Office Circular No: SODD14/1999
11 SOLACE (Scotland)/COSLA. The A-Z of Scottish Local Government. May 2003
Researching Reporting on Performance to the Public

Around half the responding local authorities indicated that they had undertaken or commissioned research on how they report information about the performance of their services to the public. The most common research method used was surveys, which generally examined levels of satisfaction with council services and included a section on reporting performance information. These were often conducted using members of councils’ Citizens’ Panel as the sample base. A number of councils indicated that they had carried out qualitative research on how they report performance information to the public. Most commonly, an independent research contractor was commissioned to conduct and report on a series of focus groups.

Councils generally sought the same information regardless of the research methods used; assessment of:
• the level of public interest in performance information in general;
• the level of interest in the performance of specific services;
• the type of performance information the public would like to receive (e.g. performance indicators, performance against targets, other achievements etc);
• public awareness of existing council publications which report on performance; and
• the preferred format(s) in which performance information should be made available to the public.

Good Practice: Assessing Public Perception of Performance Reporting

Using Focus Groups

Midlothian and Renfrewshire Councils commissioned focus group research into local residents’ perceptions of their public performance reports. Both exercises sought responses on what performance information should be published, how it could be presented in a user-friendly way and what the best medium for communication would be. The research findings are being used to inform each council’s public performance reporting strategy.

Using Citizens Panels

Perth and Kinross Council has used its ‘Viewfinder’ panel of local residents to obtain feedback on the performance information that the council produces. Findings from the citizens’ panel complement those from other consultation mechanisms, including the feedback sheet included in the council’s performance report and its ongoing contacts with community councils, tenants’ organisations, parents and pupils and a variety of other service user groups.
These consultation mechanisms are intended to help the council deliver on its Annual Report commitment to ensure that in producing information about its performance and services, it ‘provides the information the public wants in the way that it wants it’.

**Angus Council** has also used its citizens’ panel to help it deliver on the four key objectives in its public performance reporting strategy:

- the right information
- to the right stakeholders
- in the right medium
- at the right time

The council intends publishing further performance information in addition to the SPIs and believes that consultation has a key role in ensuring that this additional information has value for the users of services.

Overall, there is a range of activity on-going in councils in producing performance literature, although half of councils are still placing undue reliance on only publishing performance indicators in a newspaper advertisement. Moreover, for all councils, SPIs remains central to all performance material published.

In the next stage of the study some councils were put to the test by involving Consumer Network volunteers to see how they fared in accessing performance information from their local authorities.

**Scottish Consumer Council Network - Accessing Public Performance Information**

Using the Scottish Consumer Council Network (around 90 volunteers, distributed across 32 council areas) a telephone exercise was devised to test out public accessibility of current local authority performance information and to gain some preliminary views on the usefulness and relevance of the performance information provided. A summary of the findings from the research exercise is discussed below. The findings from this exercise were also used to inform the topic guide for the focus groups in the next stage of the research. Network members were asked to:

- telephone their local council to request written information on the performance of council services;
- record the number of calls and response times from date of call to receipt of information; and
- complete a short questionnaire on their experience of contacting the council and their views of the clarity, relevance and usefulness of performance information received.

The exercise was carried out between September and October 2002. Forty Network members returned the completed questionnaire, covering 20 out of the 32 council areas across Scotland.

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12 For a fuller account of the study see Scottish Consumer Council Consumer Network Report Number 3, November 2002.
Contacting the Council

Network members’ views on contacting councils were, on the whole, positive. In the majority of cases local authority staff receiving an enquiry about performance information were friendly and helpful. However there were a few instances whereby the staff had no clear understanding of what was meant by performance information. The majority of Network members received the information requested after one call. No respondent had to make more than three calls. The majority of Network members also received the written information within a week and only six out of 39 volunteers had to wait longer than one week. There was a degree of inconsistency of approach in the information relayed and sent out within four councils who were contacted by more than one Network member.

Types and Format of Performance Information

There were two broad types of information sent out by councils to respondents. The majority of councils (13 out of 20) sent out a copy of performance indicators published in a local newspaper (i.e. fulfilling the current minimum statutory obligation). The remainder of councils sent out brochures and/or booklets containing performance information. Overall, a greater proportion of Network members who received brochures/booklets were more likely to positively rate the information compared to those who received the basic information. Respondents made a number of comments, sometimes contradictory, on how the information provided could be improved.

Comments from some respondents who received SPI newspaper advertisement in response to information request.

‘I do not think that the presentation of the document could have been improved upon as it is concise and easy to follow.’
[Edinburgh Network member]

‘There is a lot of information printed in the newspaper - such small print that it is very difficult to read. A rather more condensed and legible booklet would be a great advantage.’
[Orkney Islands Network volunteer]

‘Style and presentation not very good. Very formal style and tiny font size. The style puts off the casual reader. Those interested in specific issues would however be able to find the information. I would have been interested in mobile libraries visiting frequencies...does not highlight the negative performances i.e. the fall in crime clear-up rates or rise in formal complaints against the police.’
[Fife Network member]
Comments from some respondents who received information in a brochure format.

‘Report was far more wide ranging and informative than I expected but perhaps the production is ‘over the top’ in terms of who it is produced for i.e. the council tax payers.’
[Highlands Network member]

‘I was very impressed with the report and can’t think of any improvements.’
[West Lothian Network member]

Comments from respondents in Glasgow, one received information in newspaper advertisement and the other in a brochure format.

‘Based on what is in the Daily Record...a lot of people would find it off-putting to read - tiny print & columns of figures - perhaps pie-charts/diagrams etc would be easier to read........A appalling low rates of library use and recycling of domestic waste. I was surprised at the amount per pupil spent on secondary education........’
[Glasgow Network member]

‘To be honest I was most impressed with regard to the report. It is very well put together and professional and puts a caring face on the city.’
[Glasgow Network member]

Clarity and Use of Information

The majority of respondents assessed the clarity, interest and informativeness of the material sent to be very good or fairly good. A smaller number of respondents gave the information a fairly good/very good rating for relevance and usefulness. Almost all respondents had an increased knowledge of the performance of council services after receiving the information. Respondents made a number of comments on how, if at all, they would use the information.

‘To be honest I would make no use of it whatsoever.’
[East Ayrshire Network member]

‘If I had a complaint it would be useful; but as published it doesn’t state what performance targets are - this would be needed to criticise a service.’
[Aberdeenshire Network member]

‘To challenge council about services especially at election time. Also to campaign for more recycling.’
[Glasgow Network member]

Over half of the respondents stated they would use the information to comment or challenge the level of services provided by councils.
Conclusion

On reviewing the performance literature provided by local authorities together with the experiences and comments from Consumer Network volunteers there remains scope for improving on the performance information produced and disseminated to residents by councils. Councils rely on SPIs as the basis for reporting on their performance to the public. Over half of councils in Scotland provide a ‘performance report’ that goes beyond that of the statutory ‘newspaper ad’, but the majority of Consumer Network volunteers were sent a copy of the newspaper advertisement.

Taken in isolation, the results from the Consumer Network exercise cannot be overstated, however the comments and responses from Network members helped to identify areas for further discussion that were pursued in more detail during the focus groups which are discussed in the next chapter. Issues included:

- the most appropriate format of performance information;
- the ways in which individuals should be able to access performance information;
- how performance information should be prescribed;
- the type of performance information that could be used by individuals to challenge service levels; and,
- how performance information might be used.
Chapter 4 – Views on Local Government Performance Information

Introduction

This chapter outlines the key findings from a series of focus group involving service users from a range of backgrounds. Views were sought on their awareness of local government performance information, current levels of usage and views on accessible formats. The groups also explored what potential there was for them to use the information to challenge service levels and seek service improvements.

Aims of Focus Group Research

SCC commissioned the Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU) to carry out the qualitative element of the project, based on a series of five focus groups between December 2002 and February 2003. The groups gathered views on councils’ public performance information from individual consumers, targeting disadvantaged consumer groups that might experience particular difficulty in accessing and using councils’ performance information. The key objectives of the focus groups were to:

• collect information on levels of awareness of the current public performance information produced by councils;
• consider the extent to which consumers use performance information to find out about services, challenge current levels of service and hold councils to account;
• explore different formats for producing meaningful public performance information;
• identify the types and format of information that consumers would find useful and relevant to them; and
• explore the use of other mechanisms for scrutinising local authority service performance.

Focus Group Methodology

SLGIU recruited and facilitated the focus groups, which were recruited from the following groups:

• People on low incomes/ living in poverty
• Black and minority ethnic (b.m.e.)
• Older people
• People living in a rural environment
• People living in an urban environment.

These groups were targeted to allow a range of perspectives to be expressed. They comprised a range of service users including a mixture of community activists, including members of community councils, tenants’ organisations and voluntary sector organisations, and non-activist members of the public.
The focus groups were:

- Urban Focus Group: held in Dundee
- Rural Focus Group: held in Dumfries and Galloway
- Black and Minority Ethnic Focus Group: held in Fife
- Older People Focus Group: held in Edinburgh
- Low Income Focus Group: held in Glasgow.

Each focus group lasted for approximately 1.5 hours, with an average of seven members of the public participating in each. A topic guide drawing upon issues raised by the Consumer Network exercise was used by the facilitators as a means of structuring the focus groups’ discussions, although this was applied in a flexible manner to avoid narrowing the discussions. A detailed account of the focus group methodology and the topic guide is presented in the appendices to this report.

**Focus Group Research Findings**

**General Comments**

The following section set out the key findings from the focus groups. The findings are structured in the themes identified in the research objectives mentioned above.

It was clear from the focus group discussions that most participants, especially community activists, displayed some degree of understanding of the problems and constraints faced by local authorities and were able to place their perceptions of council performance in this context.

Generally there was a high level of consistency in the responses expressed by each of the focus groups. While each group raised issues that were peculiar to its discussion, there was no contradiction in groups’ responses on the substantive issues discussed in relation to council public performance reporting. The level of consensus that emerged from such a diverse focus group population allows firm conclusions to be drawn regarding the public perception of council performance information.

**General Perceptions of Local Government**

At the outset of each focus group, participants were asked a number of introductory questions relating to their general perceptions of council services and how their performance is accounted for. There was unanimous agreement with the principle that councils should account for how they are using their resources and for their performance, preferably within the context of prescribed targets.

‘If they didn’t publish it [performance information], they could do what they like and hang everybody.’

[Urban Group, Dundee]
There was also a common view that councils tend to provide unequal levels of service within their areas, with some localities receiving better services than others. In rural areas it was felt that the main centres of population received superior services compared to outlying localities, while in urban areas there was a view that more affluent areas received better council services than less affluent areas. These perceptions in part explain the support expressed for performance information being made available at sub-local authority areas.

**What Does the Public Know?**

**Awareness and understanding of performance information**

A strong and consistent theme emerging from the focus groups was that existing arrangements for publishing SPIs in an advertisement in a local newspaper are not an effective way of promoting public awareness. This was clearly illustrated by the very low awareness among participants that councils are required to publish performance indicators at all. There was even lower recognition of the specific indicators that are published.

Related to this finding, the focus group discussions demonstrated that very few participants had seen the SPIs newspaper advertisement in their area. Awareness of the advert was highest in Dumfries and Galloway, where half the participants recalled seeing the advertisement. This high level of recognition can be explained by the fact that some of this group were recruited on the basis that they had responded to the Council’s SPI advertisement. No more than one or two members of other groups had any recollection of having seen the SPI advertisement.

Generally, recall of the advertisements and of the existence of SPIs generally, was significantly higher among community activists than among non-activist participants, suggesting virtually no awareness among the general public. The SPIs pertaining to housing and education services had higher levels of recognition than others. Partly this reflected the level of publicity associated with these indicators. For example, extensive national media attention had alerted a number of participants to the existence of education SPIs, while half of the Dundee group participants could remember seeing the Council’s Housing News newsletter which included the Housing Performance Report, although they could not recall any details. Some people had also been alerted to the existence of particular SPIs because of a personal interest in the specific service areas concerned. Those acknowledged by participants included social work, roads and planning.

Participants suggested a number of explanations for the ineffectiveness of the newspaper advertisements. One related to the content and the format of the information presented (format issues are considered in greater depth later in the report). There was general consensus that the adverts would hold little appeal to the average newspaper reader and most would tend to ignore it.

‘Looking at that I’d just say load of **** and turn the page.’
(Urban Group, Dundee)
Leaving aside the appeal of the advertisements themselves, participants indicated that a proportion of the population would miss this information because they do not read the newspaper concerned. In larger rural council areas it is unlikely that any single paper will have universal coverage, and even where several papers are used to carry the advertisement, these papers may not achieve full coverage throughout the area. In Dumfries and Galloway for example, the SPI advert is published in three local papers, but focus group members indicated that these papers are not extensively read in certain parts of the council area where other local newspapers predominate. On a related theme, the Black and Minority Ethnic (b.m.e.) group reported that people from black and ethnic minority communities are more likely to read national papers than local papers, so SPI adverts are unlikely to reach this group.

All participants agreed that councils could do more to publicise the availability of performance information and it is clear that the changes under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 provide an opportunity to remedy the ineffectiveness of current arrangements. Participants’ suggestions for improving public performance reporting are considered below.

**How Performance Information used by the Public?**

The general view among participants was that the principal value of performance information for members of the public should be derived from helping them to challenge current levels of service and hold councils to account for the level or quality of services they provide. A practical example of this was described by a member of the Dumfries and Galloway group who had read the Council’s performance report and sought an explanation from the Council for a building control service he had received which did not meet his requirements as a consumer.

Participants in the (b.m.e.) group suggested that performance information has a potential use in helping to establish whether the needs of b.m.e communities are being met in areas such as education and housing. However, participants in some of the groups highlighted impediments to performance information being used to hold councils accountable.

Members of the Dumfries and Galloway group indicated that many of the SPIs published by the council do not reflect their needs and priorities and hence have limited value in terms of accountability. The targets included in the planning SPIs were highlighted as an example. While the council might be meeting the prescribed targets for these services, they are not necessarily meeting the needs of residents and users of the services.

‘The Planning Department’s letter said it did this thing within 21 days and another thing within 21 days, but we still had to wait three and a half months before we could start building. They might have met the indicators, but they didn’t meet our needs’.
(Rural Group, Dumfries and Galloway)
Also adopting the perspective of the individual, the Low Income Group was concerned that general performance information is of little use to those seeking to challenge the council on services they have received personally. This form of redress may be more effectively addressed through councils’ complaints procedures (the possible linkages between complaints and performance management are discussed later).

“When you go to challenge the council they’ve got an answer all the time. They use all these mad words.”

(Low Income Group, Glasgow)

Another barrier to the use of performance information identified by the focus groups, was the extent to which the public is equipped or inclined to use it. Members of the Older People Group believed that more educated and assertive people are able to gain more from using the information to argue their case and gain satisfaction from the council. Members of the Dundee group expressed their concern that the wider general public is apathetic in relation to such matters and unlikely to be interested in using performance information to challenge the council.

The Low Income Group suggested that if the council was more open and less defensive about the things it cannot do, then the public would be more understanding and less critical of its performance. Performance information should not just be used to highlight achievements, but also to highlight where councils are not providing the level of service expected. They should also provide an explanation of failure. The group suggested that if people had more reliable and balanced information about what the council is doing they might be more inclined to use it.

What Information Does the Public Want?

Type and format of performance information

Participants identified a range of information they would like to see published by local authorities. The views expressed amount to a demanding set of information. Meeting such demands will place new challenges on councils.

“You want to know when the Council’s going to do something – if and when – and how they’re going to progress something.”

(Older People Group, Edinburgh)

Suggestions included:

• Information that measures progress in achieving targets for service delivery and clearly accounting for how money is spent. In particular, information on progress towards meeting targets and implementation of services was perceived to be central to the public’s ability to judge councils’ performance.

• The information should reflect the needs and priorities of service users and of specific groups such as black and minority ethnic communities (suggestions on how these can be identified are outlined below).
• Members of the Older People Group indicated that they would welcome more information relating to crime, including clear-up rates and police response times.
• The black and minority ethnic group identified a range of performance information that it felt would be helpful in monitoring councils’ effectiveness in meeting the needs of the b.m.e. community. Suggestions included information on the ethnic configuration of council staff groups, educational attainment, housing provision, library resources and clear up rates for racially motivated crimes.

‘What I want to know from performance information is about resources and location. What are the resources and where are they spent?’
(B.M.E. Group, Fife)

All focus groups confirmed that very few of the current SPIs are meaningful to the general public, with the perception being that SPIs are aimed at professionals and bureaucrats. The Accounts Commission itself acknowledges this fact in its report on the 2001/02 performance indicators:

‘We expect some public interest in this report, but anticipate that the principal users will be those acting on the public’s behalf in providing services and monitoring services (e.g. councillors, council officials and council auditors)’

Related to this was the belief that the public should be more involved in defining and monitoring performance. Although it was recognised that this would be difficult due to public apathy and lack of interest, participants made a number of suggestions on how the public might be engaged.

One idea was that councils should allow the public to feed back on their performance reports. East Lothian Council includes a feedback form in its performance report, which participants identified as one way of gauging on which issues the public would like to receive performance information.

Related to the earlier reference to councils’ complaints systems, the Dumfries and Galloway Group suggested that formal complaints received by councils could be analysed to identify patterns in the concerns expressed by the public regarding council performance. This analysis could then be used to develop thinking on performance measures that reflect public concerns.

Other suggested means of consulting the public on performance information included the use of established groups such as community councils, citizens’ panels and citizens’ juries. However, many existing community organisations feel they are being ‘consulted to death’ and therefore may not have the capacity to be fully involved in performance target setting and monitoring.

The b.m.e. group was of the view that consultation should involve existing community/representative groups, since they are more likely to take a strategic view. This group believed there to be a danger in consulting individuals as this may only elicit personal views on issues such as street cleaning and dog fouling rather than strategic overviews.

13 Accounts Commission Compendium of SPIs, 2001/02
Level of detail required

All groups agreed that information at a sub-authority/local area level would be useful. The common view was that local information would be more meaningful and relevant to the public than council-wide information. Such information would allow comparison about levels of service across the council, hence helping to confirm or dispel the fears about disparities in service levels mentioned earlier. It was also felt that this level of detail would allow consumers to challenge the council about poor levels of service in their area.

‘Localised information. After all, you are interested in the area you live in and if the streets are bad and the roads are bad, that’s the bit you want to know about.’

(Older People Group, Edinburgh)

The perception of what constituted a ‘local area’ differed according to whether focus groups were drawn from rural or urban areas. In the cities a local area was taken to mean relatively small geographical communities or districts such as Craigmillar (Edinburgh), Govan, Possilpark (Glasgow) and Douglas (Dundee), all of which were referred to specifically by participants as areas for which they would wish to have performance information. Members of the Dumfries and Galloway Group expressed the desire to see performance information presented on the basis of the council’s existing local area committee boundaries, each of which cover relatively large geographical areas. However, some concern was expressed about placing council-wide or local area performance information in league table format. This was not felt to be a valid or helpful way of presenting the information.

The black and minority ethnic group expressed the view that information on an area basis would help monitoring of issues relevant to b.m.e. communities as they tend to be concentrated in certain areas. Council-wide statistics on racist incidents tend to be less useful because they can disguise the concentration of incidents in certain local areas. However, with the exception of the b.m.e. group, there was little interest expressed in producing discrete performance information for specific demographic groups such as older people or those on low incomes.

All groups agreed that there should be a range of detail beyond the headline SPIs, which people would be able to access if they were interested. Participants felt that there may be a role for the council website as a source of this information and that the published performance information should include references signposting interested individuals to sources of more detailed information. However, it was felt that those with only a general interest in performance information should not be expected to cope with any great level of detail as this might undermine their interest.

Enhancing the Utility of Performance Information

Participants were agreed on the basic principles that should be applied to the presentation of performance information; namely, that it should be presented in a format that is: simple, jargon-free, easy-to-read and interesting. Further, all participants agreed that performance reports should be written from the service users’ perspective and for a general audience, not for the benefit of professionals.
There was an extremely negative response to the newspaper advertisements that councils have used until now to meet their statutory obligations on the presentation of performance information. These were judged to have minimal value for the public. The presentation was criticised, with the text in particular being considered too small. Advertisements were criticised as incorporating too much detail and lacking the contextual information that would aid understanding of the contents. It was felt that only the very interested would be motivated to read them.

‘You’d need to be a Philadelphia lawyer to make sense of this information.’
(Low Income Group, Glasgow)

In contrast, participants were much more receptive to the style and content of some of the public performance reports published by individual councils. In particular, Dumfries and Galloway Council’s ‘Broadcast’ and East Lothian Council’s ‘Aiming High’ magazines were well received by all participants for their use of colour, charts and graphs, language, style and tone. The thematic approach adopted in Aiming High was particularly well received. Figure 1 shows an extract from Aiming High publication and an extract from the same council’s SPI newspaper advertisement to demonstrate the impact of improving the accessibility of the information.

**Figure 1: Shows example from Aiming High publication**
**Good Practice: User-friendly Performance Reports**

Dumfries and Galloway and East Lothian councils distribute their public performance reports to every household in their council areas. Both are presented in a glossy magazine format that members of SCC focus groups considered attractive and user-friendly. Each makes extensive use of colour, charts and attractive fonts to enhance readability.

East Lothian’s Aiming High report was praised for presenting performance information according to lifestyle and life event themes rather than traditional service categories. These were perceived to have greater resonance for members of the public reading the performance information. The themes used include:

- Children, young people and families
- A safer community
- Leisure and lifestyle
- Looking after our area
- Bricks and mortar
- Care and support.

The cost of producing and distributing Dumfries and Galloway’s Broadcast magazine to all households in the council area (18p per copy) was judged by focus group participants to represent very good value for money.

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**Figure 2: Shows example from Broadcast publication**

![Broadcast Magazine Example](image)
While other councils’ performance reports were better received than the statutory newspaper advertisements, few were viewed as positively as the magazine formats used by Dumfries and Galloway and East Lothian. Lack of colour and too much information were commented on as negative aspects of some of the more traditional council report-style publications.

Communicating with the Public - Getting the Information Across

Participants felt there was considerable scope for improvement in how local authorities communicate performance information to the public. There was agreement that councils should be more pro-active in trying to disseminate performance information to as wide an audience as possible.

It was suggested that the resources currently used to pay for the statutory newspaper advertisement could be utilised much more effectively. Specifically, there was support for the idea of performance reports being distributed to all households, along the Dumfries and Galloway and East Lothian models. Although there was scepticism about the resource implications of information being produced in an overly glossy magazine format, the relatively low cost of broadcast led participants to conclude that all households should receive a performance report produced in this style.

Participants were conscious of the danger that performance reports coming through letterboxes might be treated as junk mail. It was felt that this danger could be combated by incorporating the performance report into a reference publication that people were more likely to retain and use from time to time, such as A-Zs of council services.

A number of ideas for communicating performance information more pro-actively emerged from the focus groups. Most suggested a departure from the traditional published report. They included:

• Councils offering to make presentations to representative or local groups such as community councils.
• Production of a video presenting the information in graphic format that could be made available to groups or interested members of the public. The b.m.e. group suggested that a video might be an effective way of making performance information available to b.m.e. groups relatively easily and cost effectively. The b.m.e. group acknowledged that the cost of translating detailed performance reports into a number of languages would probably be prohibitive.
• Displays of ‘headline’ performance information in busy public places such as libraries and shopping centres, although this would need to be complemented by more detailed information; for example, leaflets that people could take away, references to the council’s performance information website etc.
• Using free local papers, local radio and TV to carry information or advertisements about the availability of performance information.
Participants were asked specifically about the internet. The general view was that the web has a back-up role for those seeking further detail, since it is a highly cost-effective means of disseminating large volumes of information. However, there was a recognition of the limitations associated with the lack of internet access for significant sections of the population.

**Views on Reliability of Councils’ Performance Information**

There was reluctant acceptance from most participants of the need to take the performance information councils publish on trust, particularly since it is verified by independent auditors. However, several participants expressed their lack of confidence in the information provided by councils generally, and in performance information in particular. They saw a temptation for councils to manipulate how this information is presented and suggested that they may be disinclined to publish information that leaves them open to criticism, especially where they are already being criticised in the press.

‘They want you to know what they want you to know.’
(Low Income Group, Glasgow)

The scope for ‘spin’ was felt to be a particular issue in relation to statutory performance information given its largely statistical nature, with many indicating their instinctive distrust of statistics.

‘When I see stuff like that I just glaze over. It’s going to be a sales pitch.’
(Urban Group, Dundee)

Participants repeated their desire to see councils provide a more balanced account of their performance, openly acknowledging instances where it has not been of a satisfactory standard.

The groups were asked what would give them greater confidence in the information that councils publish. Some participants suggested that special interest groups could audit performance information related to their particular areas of expertise; for example, environmental groups, tenants’ and community groups. There was also a suggestion that a ‘consumer’s champion’ be appointed in each local authority area, part of whose role could be to verify the validity of published performance information.

However, these ideas were not explored in any great depth within the focus groups, partly because of the complexities involved in addressing their practical implementation. There may be merit in pursuing these ideas in greater depth in another forum.

It was also felt that the presentation of performance information by sub-authority/local area would make it easier for people to assess whether it fitted with their own experience of council services. Council-wide information made this assessment more difficult, given the possibility that this can disguise variations in service quality across a wide area.
What Else Can Councils Do?

Other mechanisms for scrutinising performance

Aside from the publication of performance information, participants were asked to suggest other ways in which councils might account for their performance. Some groups felt that while there were a number of mechanisms for holding local councillors to account, more could be done to make council officials directly accountable. Suggestions for this included joint officer-member constituent surgeries and a requirement for officers to appear before local committees to answer questions and respond to queries about local service delivery.

‘M Ps have surgeries, councillors have surgeries, it wouldn’t be a bad thing to have occasional access to the Head of Roads or the Head of you know... whatever’
(Rural Group, Dumfries and Galloway)

There was also a suggestion that the present system does not provide consumers with the information they need to challenge councils’ performance effectively at the point of service. This could be remedied to some extent by promoting consumers’ awareness of performance targets at the point at which they use council services. For example, people lodging planning applications should be informed of the various targets that apply when they lodge applications. At present, service users often only learn of service targets after they have received a service, in effect, too late to help them influence the quality of service they receive.

Some focus group members were complimentary about the information that local authorities already provide about their performance and compared their openness favourably with central government, quangos and government agencies, which are perceived to get off relatively lightly. It was felt that all public bodies should be accountable to the public and consumers and that local authorities should not be singled out for higher levels of scrutiny.

Conclusion

This chapter has reflected the key areas of discussion and the issues raised by participants during the focus groups. There was unanimous agreement among the groups with the principle that councils should be required to publish information that accounts for their performance. A very low level of awareness of councils’ published performance information among the general public/consumers of council services was identified. However, there is evidence that public awareness has been heightened by media coverage of some aspects of performance information.

The newspaper advertisements that councils are required to publish under existing legislation are not effective in raising public awareness of performance information. Statutory performance indicators as currently configured are perceived to be targeted at a professional audience and not at helping the public hold councils to account. They are perceived as not being responsive to, or reflective of, the needs of service users.
Public performance information has not proved to be effective in helping service users to hold councils to account. There is a general perception among service users that councils can and should do more to raise public awareness of performance information and that they can communicate performance information to the public more effectively than at present.

Participants expressed the types of information they would require to hold councils to account for their performance. Service users would welcome more information on how councils spend resources and the progress being made towards achieving service targets. It was also stated that councils should be more open about where their performance is unsatisfactory. A balanced view of performance would encourage people to view their reports as more credible. Presentation of performance information by local areas within councils would help them to draw more meaningful conclusions about the performance of their council. Performance information being made available at different levels of detail, which could be accessed according to level of interest, was highlighted. The internet was seen having a role to play for those seeking to explore council performance information in greater depth, although problems with internet access for some groups was acknowledged.

Participants felt that they and perhaps specific services/interest groups, should be more involved in defining and monitoring council performance, although they recognise that public apathy and disinterest presents a barrier to this involvement, as does ‘consultation fatigue’ among those groups that are consulted on a frequent basis.

Some councils have sought to make the performance information more accessible by sending it to every household and presenting it in a user-friendly format. There was support for the distribution of attractively presented performance reports to all households in the council area. Focus group participants believed that, in addition to published performance reports, councils should employ a range of pro-active methods to communicate performance information. Suggestions included displays in public places and use of local media to publicise the information.

Findings from the focus groups demonstrate that service users are very demanding in the type of information they feel they need to rate councils’ performance. To meet these needs will place additional challenges on local and central government. This issue along with other findings from the focus groups are discussed further in the final chapter of the report, which makes recommendations based on issues raised during the study.
Chapter 5 - Issues Raised at Public Performance Reporting Seminar

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the issues raised at a discussion seminar organised by the Scottish Consumer Council. The seminar marked the final stage in research project. Council officers involved in public performance reporting, policy makers, consumer representatives and academics were invited to comment on the findings of the focus group research, outlined in the previous chapter, as well as having the opportunity to discuss practical issues faced by councils in reporting on performance to the public.

Seminar Programme

The seminar was held in SCC’s offices in Glasgow on 4 April 2003. The purpose of the seminar was to allow local authority representatives and other interested parties to comment on the initial findings of the research. This formed an important aspect of the research design as it gave an opportunity to producers of local government performance information to voice their own perspectives on the issues involved, and respond to the issues raised by service users during other stages of the research. The organisations represented at the seminar are listed in an appendix to this report.

The seminar was chaired by Martyn Evans, Director of SCC. Morag Brown, SCC Policy Manager for Local Government, Education and Housing gave an overview of the context for the SCC research and outlined the stages of the performance information project. Paolo Vestri and Stephen Fitzpatrick from the Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU) presented the findings of the focus group research conducted as part of the project. The concluding presentation, on developing a new best value audit for local authorities, was given by Ronnie Nicol from Audit Scotland. The new audit will include an assessment of how well local authorities have discharged their duties of reporting on their performance to the public.

Seminar Discussion - Focus Group Research Findings

The presentation by SLGIU on the findings from the focus group research is not replicated in full here as the research results are covered in-depth in the previous chapter; however the key areas highlighted during the presentation are listed below.

- The focus group participants agreed unanimously that local authorities should be required to publish performance information.
- There is a very low level of awareness among service users of published performance information.

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14 SCC commissioned Robert Stevenson, RDS Managing Consultant, RDS Consultancy, to prepare a report on the key points raised during the seminar. This chapter is based on the report which was distributed to all seminar participants in draft for comment and amended accordingly.
• Service users feel that there should be more involvement in defining and monitoring council performance, although they recognise that public apathy and disinterest presents a barrier to this involvement, as does 'consultation fatigue' among those groups that are consulted on a frequent basis.
• More information of local authority spending and progress in meeting service delivery targets would be welcomed.
• Statutory performance indicators (SPI's) are not perceived to have been designed to meet the needs and expectations of the public.
• Improvements are required in the quality of information published and the way this is presented.

A number of recommendations based on the findings of the research were presented. These included:

• councils should seek to increase public awareness of the performance information that they publish;
• councils should consider the viability of presenting performance information on a sub-authority/local area basis;
• councils should seek the views of consumers, service users and other stakeholders when developing their public performance reporting strategies;
• councils should make public performance information more accessible and user friendly; and
• councils should publish performance information in a user friendly format that is designed with the needs of the public in mind.

The points raised during the discussion session following the presentation by SLGIU largely centred around Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs), in particular the research conclusions that, although focus groups participants agreed that councils should publish performance information, SPIs were not perceived to have been designed to meet the needs and expectations of the public.

A number of points were made in response to this from council representatives, firstly to restate the publication of SPIs was a legal requirement that councils had to fulfil. Secondly, SPIs were introduced in the nineties when there was a very different relationship between central and local government; however, the political context had now changed and given the introduction of Best Value it was felt that this would have implications for how SPIs were used and developed. It was also highlighted that central government has an interest in the performance of local authorities. SPIs are one way that councils can be held to account for their performance by central government. However, there may have been an assumption that the interest of central government, as a stakeholder, was the same as the public’s interest. In other words, SPIs may be expected to fulfil two different functions.

Participants commented that there is some evidence that members of the public are becoming more aware and concerned about different levels of service both between local authorities and between different areas within individual council areas. The publishing of SPI information may have made a contribution towards this heightened level of awareness.
In response to whether or not performance information could be used to challenge levels of services, it was commented on that some councils are more sensitive to comparative SPI information than others. Some Chief Executives make use of SPI data to challenge service managers about their performance relative to other councils. Furthermore, a view was stated that SPIs may be an instrument for promoting service improvement but this is likely to be the result of internal pressure e.g. from councillors and senior managers rather than from the public.

It was stated that there is a perception that performance information is currently made available when it suits councils rather than when service users may need or want it. More consideration should be made to providing service users with performance information when they are actually making use of services. This would allow them to make comparisons between their own experience and the published performance information. It was also suggested that SPIs should be published in conjunction with the issuing of council tax bills. This would promote accountability and allow people to make a comparison between council tax levels and levels of service performance. Some concerns were raised, however, about the bulk of information that would need to be sent out and the fact that the information would be almost a year out of date.

There was further discussion around the issue of the timing of publishing information. A participant stated that councils have to publish their SPIs before national information is available. This makes it impossible to include comparative information in Public Performance Information Reports. This needs to be balanced with the need to ensure that individual local authority SPIs are published as soon as possible after the period they relate to. There were some concerns that the current number of SPIs made the information too complex and overwhelming for most of the general public. There were also concerns that the information had to be published by 28 September each year, which could mean that there was not sufficient time to produce attractive and accessible publications. However, it was also noted that there was nothing to prevent councils producing performance information reports after the September deadline as long as they could demonstrate that the basic information was available to the public by the deadline.

Finally, a seminar participant made the point that to focus attention solely on SPIs was taking too narrow a definition of performance information and that SPIs need to be seen in the wider context of the range of other publications produced by council’s. These include service plans and strategies many of which contain performance information including spending information and service delivery targets. However, the one difference between these publications and SPIs is the fact that the latter is generally the only source of information about performance that covers the whole range of local authority services.
Overview of Presentation – Auditing Best Value

A presentation on developing a new Best Value audit for local authorities was given. The audit will include an assessment of how well local authorities have discharged their duties of reporting on their performance to the public. It is expected that the new audit will be introduced from November 2003 and be based on a three-year cycle. The new approach will focus on councils as a whole and include increased emphasis on performance outcomes and results. Audit Scotland aims to make every effort to co-ordinate the audit with the work of other inspectorates and scrutiny bodies.

It was outlined that the new Best Value Audit represented a development of the Performance Management and Planning Audit (PMP) that had been operating in Scotland since 1999. A review had been undertaken of the results of the PMP audits that had been carried out. Overall, the results showed that councils generally performed well in terms of Public Performance Reporting (PPR). There was, however, a wide range of results with some councils performing very well while others scored very poorly in relation to the PPR aspect of the audit. It was also found that while councils were generally performing well in terms of the PPR aspect of the audit at a corporate level, they were less likely to be performing well at an individual service level. At this level PPR was rated lowest of the ten criteria used in the audit of individual services. Differences found when comparing results of public performance reporting at the corporate and individual service levels are listed below.

**At a corporate level**
Councils tended to be performing strongly in relation to the following aspects of PPR:
- the provision of basic information;
- providing feedback on the results of consultations; and
- information relating to finance and spending priorities.

The weaker aspects of councils' performance in relation to PPR included:
- reporting on targets and performance improvements;
- providing a clear view of overall performance; and
- systematic deployment of performance reporting across the council.

**At an individual services level**
Councils tended to be performing strongly in relation to the following aspects of PPR:
- providing basic information about the service;
- information relating to service standards; and
- reporting on the results of BV reviews and service improvement processes.

The weaker aspects of individual services performance in relation to PPR included:
- information about targets for performance improvement and whether previous targets have been achieved.
- trends information to show how services are changing; and
- comparative information to show how the services compare with others.
The presentation concluded with some key issues for the future development of PPR.

- The key challenge facing councils was to publish information that provided the public with a meaningful picture of the council’s overall performance.
- Providing information that was relevant and focused on the interests of the public and service users.
- Linking planning performance reporting to planning processes that focus on the needs of service users.
- Performance reporting should be ‘built into’ councils’ internal performance management systems rather than being ‘bolted on’ as a separate system.

**Seminar Discussion - Best Value Auditing and Beyond**

The seminar concluded with a structured discussion session. The first few points in the discussion were prompted by presentation on the new Best Value audit in relation to: the ‘scoring’ of councils; basis for the approach being taken and the reasoning behind the three-year cycle of audit.

Providing an overall ‘score, rating or label’ for councils would not form part of the new approach, unlike the position in England which is discussed in Chapter 1 of the report. The view was expressed that the introduction of such a rating system would require a change in culture within local government in Scotland and a consensus that such a system was a constructive approach to continuous improvement. These conditions do not currently exist in Scotland. Instead the approach being taken in Scotland was to tailor the audit approach to the needs and circumstances of individual councils, within a national framework. While this approach had the advantages of flexibility and responsiveness it was also pointed out that the disadvantage was the lack of consistency making it difficult to make comparisons between councils. Another participant also made the point that the fact that there are only 32 councils in Scotland (compared to over 400 in England) means that it is more difficult to make comparisons. Scotland’s councils are all different and it would be difficult to construct meaningful ‘families’ of authorities for comparison purposes. The fact that a different approach is being taken to PPR in all of the countries of the UK also means that it is difficult to make cross-border comparisons. (It may, for example make more sense to compare Glasgow’s performance with Liverpool or Newcastle rather than with other Scottish councils.)

On the cycle of the new audit process it was explained that the three-year cycle will enable the audit to look at trends over a number of years and identify on-going improvements. It was, however, noted that consideration also had to be given to the starting position as it may be more difficult for a high performing council to secure further performance improvements than for a council that was performing relatively poorly. Consideration also needed to be given to environmental and contextual factors that could influence an individual council’s ability to secure performance improvements. One final point with regard to the new audit was in relation to the use of SPIs: it was suggested that if councils came up with a more relevant set of performance indicators than SPIs then Audit Scotland may focus on these in the Best Value audit.
A range of topics were discussed in the final session; these focused on practical difficulties that arose in reporting on performance to the public.

A view was expressed that there is an apparent central dilemma in the approach towards PPR. If the information that is presented is too simple it will not be meaningful; however, on the other hand, if it is too complex it will not be understood by most of the public. An appropriate balance between simplicity and complexity, therefore, needs to be found. While it is recognised that the public is likely to be more interested in local information, i.e. what is the position in their community, neighbourhood or town, there is also a need to manage expectations. It will not always be possible to disaggregate information to an area level and where it is possible the costs of producing the information may outweigh the perceived benefits.

One participant stated that SPIs were originally developed as a substitute for market forces in monopoly public services. They are, however, a very crude substitute and need to be viewed in the context of other ways of evaluating performance such as feedback from service users and the democratic process. Councils have to be sensitive to a wide range of signals about their performance rather than simply relying on a single indicator. A representative from the Scottish Executive stated that central government has an interest in councils’ performance and will want to be assured that authorities are using their new freedoms responsibly. SPIs will be one way that the Executive will evaluate the extent to which councils are performing effectively. There are, however, other potential mechanisms such as local outcome agreements that can be used to set shared targets and monitor performance against these targets.

At the seminar everyone seemed to agree that providing performance information is a ‘good thing’ but there is little evidence that it is actually making a difference in terms of driving service improvements. There is a danger that the publication of performance information is regarded as simply ‘being seen to be accountable’ rather than part of an overall approach to consumer engagement and continuous improvement. Linked to this there appeared to be a lack of clarity of purpose on the part of councils on publishing performance beyond that of being seen to be accountable. A council officer said while there may be little evidence that the public use performance information as a mechanism for pressurising councils to improve services, it is a vital management tool that is used internally within councils to identify areas where there is scope for improvements. Building upon this point others commented that public performance reporting needs to be linked to councils’ overall strategies for information management and communicating with the public. There are strong linkages with other initiatives such as community budgeting and community planning.

In concluding the discussion session a consumer representative stated that councils should also be developing more creative approaches to providing the public with performance information at the point of service or point of contact. The public should also be able to access performance information relating to their specific interests at the time when they need it rather than just when it is produced by the council.
Conclusion

The seminar highlighted a number of issues relating to Public Performance Reporting (PPR). These are summarised below.

• PPR is generally seen as ‘a good thing’ but there are uncertainties about the best way to do it and the impact that it is having in terms of driving service improvements.
• Central government has an interest in the performance of local authorities and SPIs are one way that councils can be held to account for their performance by central government. However, there may have been an assumption that the needs of central government, as a stakeholder, were the same as the public’s interest. In other words, SPIs may be expected to fulfil two different functions.
• Councils have a wide range of stakeholders who are interested in their performance. Different groups of stakeholders will have different needs and expectations and therefore a ‘one size fits all’ approach is inappropriate.
• Councils need to develop more creative and innovative methods of presenting and communicating this information to the public. However it is important that each council clarifies and agrees the purpose of publishing performance information before reviewing how they communicate this information. They may wish to publish that statement of purpose along with the information to help the public understand their intent.
• PPR needs to be seen as an integral part of council’s overall approach to planning and performance management rather than an additional ‘bolt on’. Linkages also need to be made with other initiatives such as Community Planning, Community Budgeting and Best Value.
• Councils should consult with customers and citizens when developing PPR systems to ensure that the information they provide and the way that it is communicated is focused on their needs and expectations.
• A balance needs to be struck between providing information that is too simple and therefore not meaningful to the public and producing information that is so complex that most consumers will not understand it.
• PPR should be seen as a key element of councils’ overall approaches to engaging with customers and citizens. It has the potential to provide a focus for community engagement exercises and service user consultations.
• Performance information should be seen as one of a number of tools that can be used by service users to drive improvements in public services. It can provide them with valuable objective information about a council’s performance but they will also base their judgements on their personal experiences and perceptions.
Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter draws together the main conclusions from the analysis of the data and information collated throughout the various stages of the study. The key research questions, which the study aimed to address, were:

1. Is the publication of performance information about public services an adequate mechanism for promoting public accountability and a driver for service improvement in the public sector?
2. Is it an adequate incentive for councils to improve services?
3. Can and do service users make use of performance information as a mechanism for holding local authorities to account and challenging service quality?

In responding to these questions, based on the evidence gathered, SCC sets out the case for the introduction of a more user-led approach to public performance reporting as a means of improving public services accountability to service users.

Overall, the research has found that the use of performance information, in its current format, has not strengthened service users’ ability to hold councils to account for their performance. Although there is generally a low level of awareness among service users about councils’ performance information, on highlighting such information, they acknowledge its value and feel that councils should do more to improve the type and format of the information provided. Service users place high demands on the information they want from councils and this sets challenges for both councils and central government to meet.

Types of Local Government Accountability

Local authorities must respond to a range of different types of accountability. Traditionally, councils have focused attention on their democratic accountability to the electorate but there is now a greater understanding of the types of accountability councils must respond to including:

- democratic accountability to the voters through the electoral process;
- managerial accountability through external auditors and service specific inspections;
- financial accountability to central government; and
- direct accountability to service users.

As a consumer organisation, SCC’s interest lies in the final type of accountability and within the context of this study the role that public performance reporting plays in meeting and enhancing councils’ direct accountability to service users.
There are already a series of key public policies and initiatives, as part of central government’s modernising agenda, in strengthening the mechanisms for democratic, managerial and financial accountability. These include proposed local electoral reform, the introduction of a statutory duty of Best Value and the growth in external audit and service specific inspections (e.g. establishment of Communities Scotland and the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care). SCC believes that this study has highlighted that the final type of accountability, direct accountability to service users, is the weakest in terms of how mechanisms to maintain and enhance such accountability have been, developed, funded and supported.

**Accountability and Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs)**

The use and role of performance measurement and review in the provision of public services has become part of the culture of modern local government. Taking a performance management approach more readily associated with the private sector, and transferring it to local government is not without its difficulties and challenges.

‘It will become immediately apparent that any attempted measurement of the 3 Es, [Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness] is likely to be much more difficult for a political, sometime monopolistic, multi-service delivering local authority than for a single-product, profit-maximising company.’

There is a range of types of measures used to assess performance, however, attention has been focused on Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs), as councils are required to collect and publish such information. Such indicators do have their limitations and doubts have been expressed by many councils in Scotland about the relevance in meeting the needs of local stakeholders for performance information.

Much of the focus of SCC’s study centred on the use and publication of SPIs. This was not necessarily by design, but led by the information on reporting performance sent by councils to Consumer Network volunteers, discussions in the focus groups and issues raised during the seminar. During the seminar, for example, it was expressed that there is a danger that the publication of performance information is regarded as simply ‘being seen to be accountable’ rather than part of an overall approach to service user engagement and continuous improvement.

SPIs are a key mechanism by which councils are held to account for their performance by central government. It is important to note that there are others including relatively new initiatives such as local outcome agreements and community budgeting. Performance indicators are designed, in theory, to report on and allow comparisons on performance across councils. However, the study has shown that the majority of councils also continue to use SPIs as the central basis for reporting on performance to the public. Our research highlighted service users’ views on current SPIs. The indicators were perceived as being targeted at a professional audience and not at helping the public hold councils to account, and not being responsive to, or reflective of, the needs of service users. There was also a very low level of awareness among service users of councils’ published performance information. During the discussion seminar a key point was made that SPIs are one method by which councils are held to account by central government and that there may have been an assumption that the interest of central government, as a stakeholder, was the same as the public’s interest.

16 Stevenson, R. Reporting to the Public, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), November 1999 p23
This has led SCC to the view that the roles played by SPIs, as a mechanism of accountability to central government and as a mechanism of public accountability, have been pushed together and assumed to be the same, when they are not. As a result, this has weakened the role that reporting on performance has played in enhancing councils’ direct accountability to services users and reduced service users’ ability to use performance information to hold councils to account for their performance.

The Scottish Executive has acknowledged the limitations of councils reporting to the public via a list of SPIs in a local newspaper advertisement. The Executive has sought to address this through the introduction of greater flexibility and freedoms on public performance reporting in the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 and the production of forthcoming guidance on public performance reporting. Nevertheless, Scottish Executive, together with the Accounts Commission must ensure that SPIs are fit for purpose in terms of meeting the requirements of accountability, to them, and indirectly taxpayers, and enabling them to make cross-authority comparisons and rank councils’ performance.

User-led Performance Information

Our research has shown that service users see value in performance reporting and support the principle that councils should be required to publish information that accounts for their performance. However, service users have also felt that performance reporting, in its current format based on SPIs, has not proven effective in helping them hold councils to account or indeed acted as a driver for service improvement. SCC maintains that meeting the needs for service user performance information has been the least developed as a mechanism of direct service user accountability. Our review of councils’ current performance material and literature sent to Consumer Network volunteers highlighted that, although there were some examples of good practice, in terms of the format of the information, SPIs, despite their acknowledged limitations, remain central to councils’ performance publications.

Findings from the focus groups demonstrate that service users are very demanding in the type of information they feel they need to rate councils’ performance. Overall, focus group participants felt that councils can and should do more to raise public awareness of performance information and they also felt that councils should be more open about unsatisfactory performance. A more balanced view of performance would encourage them to view the council’s performance information as more credible. In general, service users want to know:

- how the council is taking into account their needs and views in service provision;
- that they are receiving, or have access to, the same levels of service, regardless of where they live (i.e. the publication of performance information at a local area level within local authorities);
- how the council is spending and using its resources and, linked to this, what progress is being made towards achieving stated service targets;
- information which provides a balanced view of the council’s performance;
- where they can go to access further more specific information, if required, according to level of interest;
- where to go and what to do if things are going wrong; and
- how and to whom they can feed back their views about any aspect of the performance information.
These findings, to a large extent, mirror those of a longer-term project entitled, Connecting with Communities led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). As part of the project, MORI reviewed the research it had undertaken in local government communications over the past five years.\textsuperscript{17} The review found that a wide range of surveys demonstrate that local residents are most likely to want more information on:

- reasons why decisions are made (ideally stating how local residents’ views were accounted for);
- how the council spends its money (particularly ‘where does my council tax go);
- improvements planned for local services (although councils should take care when raising expectations);
- tangible targets; and
- how to get in touch (particularly relevant to larger authorities).

In a recent seminar hosted by the Scottish Council Foundation, considering issues relating to achieving innovation in public services, there was strong agreement voiced among participants that there is a

‘... need to find better ways of assessing progress towards shared objectives, even if current approaches to target setting and evaluation of performance are inadequate. The goal was described as finding more authentic indicators.’\textsuperscript{18}

SCC acknowledges the challenges faced by councils in the search for more ‘authentic indicators’, in being more responsive to such demands in defining a user-led approach to performance information. The provision of user-led performance information is very difficult and frustrating for local government officials to deliver as was demonstrated by the views expressed by council officers during our seminar. The challenges are exacerbated by a lack of centrally funded support and investment and service users’ expectations that resources will be distributed on an equal basis across the local authority area, in effect, overlooking a key strength of local government to take a needs-led approach to resource allocation.

So what is the way forward for designing and implementing a user-led approach to performance information?

One option would be to enable each of Scotland’s 32 councils to develop their own local approaches; however SCC believes this is not an efficient and cost-effective way of progressing. Furthermore, our research found that there was consensus across the focus groups on the types of performance information users’ sought. SCC believes a better approach would involve a key role for COSLA to facilitate joint working at officer level to develop a framework for taking this forward. There is also a need for Audit Scotland to resource pilot projects on developing user-led performance information in key service areas as part of an overall approach to service user engagement. Audit Scotland must also recognise the importance of councils’ approaches to public performance reporting in the development of performance measures for evaluating community planning partnerships. Finally, SCC also sees a role for the new Improvement Service to prioritise, as a key area of work, supporting local authorities develop user-led performance information as the basis for improving public performance reporting and enhancing councils’ direct accountability to users.

\textsuperscript{17} Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM) Connecting with Communities Project, Five Years of Communications – A Review of Local Authority Communications. Joint project funded by (OPDM), Local Government Association (LGA), Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Audit Commission. 2002

\textsuperscript{18} McCormick J et. al. Innovation in Public Services, Scottish Council Foundation 2003
Making Performance Information More Accessible

SCC has outlined above the case for developing a user-led approach to public performance reporting. It is also important to emphasise that the publication of any performance material must be accessible and user-friendly.

Participants expressed in the SCC focus groups a greater willingness to use performance information where it is presented in an accessible, user-friendly format. The need for more performance information to be available to the public at the point of service was also highlighted. There has been a range of guidance material produced on informing the public, including guidance by the Best Value Task Force, reports by COSLA and a good practice toolkit available from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) website. The Best Value Task Force will shortly be publishing draft statutory guidance on public performance reporting which draws, in part, on some of the issues raised in this project.

SCC is aware from the views of our Consumer Network volunteers and focus group participants that the production and distribution of such publications can leave councils open to criticisms about ‘appropriate’ use of public money. It is therefore important that councils take this into consideration in the preparation of performance literature.

The SCC sought views and comments on examples of a range of existing performance literature produced by councils as part of the SCC focus group discussions. These views have been used as the basis for compiling the following checklist.

Checklist for accessible public performance reporting

1. Language that aids the reader’s understanding of the material presented – plain English and minimal use of jargon.
2. Inclusion of comparative information – preferably both Scottish-wide and across the local authority.
3. Explanatory information, targets and context.
4. Honest explanations as to why targets have not been achieved – not ‘spun’ by the council to deflect criticism.
5. Use of colour and graphic illustrations in charts etc, both to help make the information easier to understand and to enhance the attractiveness of the presentation.
6. Information provided in a way that is appropriate for the targeted audience (e.g. use of specific languages or Braille).
7. Uncluttered presentation, avoiding small fonts and the inclusion of too much information.
8. Information presented on the basis of lifestyle or life event themes, rather than according to traditional service functions.

20 Reference should be made to standards, applying to information for people with disabilities, which have been developed by the Scottish Accessible Information Forum. www.saifscotland.org.uk
9. Images and photographs portraying a racial mix, rather than ethnically homogeneous.
10. A single contact point (i.e. officer) for further information.
11. An opportunity for readers to provide feedback comments
12. Distribution to all residents in a council area.
13. Use of additional pro-active methods of communication to supplement written material such as use of presentations to local groups, displays of ‘headline’ performance information in busy public places, e.g. libraries, leisure and shopping centres.
14. Use of council websites for detailed performance information.
15. Use of free local media including radio and television.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this chapter SCC's interest specifically lies in examining councils' accountability to service users and within the context of this study, the role that public performance reporting plays in meeting and enhancing that accountability. SCC believes this study had shown that local government's accountability to central government and directly to service users has become confused through an over-reliance upon the use of SPIs to meet the very different demands of central government and services users. The perception from the study is that councils focus on SPIs at the expense of broader performance and quality issues simply because they have a statutory duty to collect and report on them. This has resulted in performance information which does not meet users' demands, weakens councils' direct accountability to users and reduces users' opportunities to hold councils to account for levels of service.

SCC believes the Scottish Executive, together with the Accounts Commission, must provide a justification that SPIs are fit for their own purpose as a key mechanism for keeping comparative checks on councils' service performance.

At the same time SCC also believes it is necessary strengthen councils' direct accountability to service users through the development of user-led performance information as one mechanism for ensuring direct accountability to them. This is applicable not only to local government but also across the public sector. The new legislation to introduce Best Value has placed the importance of public performance reporting on a firmer footing and given councils greater freedoms on how they report to the public. Nevertheless, SCC believes the development of a user-led approach to defining performance information requires support at a national level through the Scottish Executive, COSLA, Audit Scotland and the new Improvement Service. Only through the concerted joint efforts of these organisations and both tiers of government can councils take this opportunity to strengthen their direct accountability to service users.
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Appendix 1 – Focus Group Research Methodology

The specific focus group objectives, along with an initial review of performance literature provided by local authorities, informed the topic guide developed by SLGIU (see Appendix 2). A draft of the topic guide was circulated to members of the Best Value Task Force Public Performance Reporting Sub-Group for comment. The comments provided by members of the group and by SCC informed the topic guide used in the focus groups.

The topic guide was also influenced by the findings from the research exercise undertaken by the SCC’s Consumer Network of volunteers during September 2002. The findings outlined in Chapter 3 helped to identify areas for further discussion that were pursued as part of the focus group research. These included:
- the most appropriate format of performance information;
- the ways in which individuals should be able to access performance information;
- how performance information should be prescribed;
- the type of performance information that could be used by individuals to challenge service levels; and
- how consumers might use performance information.

The topic guide proved very effective in addressing the issues of greatest concern to those who participated in the focus groups. At no time did the focus groups address a substantive aspect of performance information that had not been anticipated in the topic guide. While the guide provided a structure for the focus groups, it was not applied in a prescriptive way, hence allowing the group discussions to develop in a flexible manner. In addition to being prompted by the topic guide, each group was invited to comment on the performance materials produced by their own local authority and to compare these materials with those produced by other local authorities. These visual prompts proved very effective in generating debate and discussion around issues related to presentation and communication of performance information.

Focus Groups

The Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU) was commissioned by SCC to undertake the recruitment, administration and facilitation of the focus groups. The focus groups targeted disadvantaged consumers and included both those that are involved in community/voluntary organisations and those that are not involved in any such organisations. Specifically, the focus groups involved the following:
- People on low incomes/living in poverty
- Black and minority ethnic
- Older people
- People living in a rural environment
- People living in an urban environment
SLGIU’s attempts to organise a sixth focus group involving people with disabilities were unsuccessful within the timescale available (see details below).

For the purposes of recruitment, SLGIU used public and voluntary sector organisations with established contacts with the targeted consumer groups. Details of the organisations concerned are presented below. As well as targeting particular groups of consumers, the recruitment procedures employed sought to ensure that a geographic spread of participants was achieved. An average of seven users of council services participated in each focus group.

A consistent approach was adopted for each focus group. Each group lasted for around 1.5 hours and followed a similar format. Each session began with an introduction: of the participants; of the background to the research; and an explanation of the scope of the discussion. The subsequent discussion in each group followed the same topic guide. Each group was jointly facilitated by two members of SLGIU staff, who sought to ensure that no individuals dominated the group discussions and that all of those in attendance had the opportunity to express their views. The facilitators were assisted in this respect by the willingness of all focus group members to actively participate in the discussions.

The focus groups were:

- Urban Focus Group: held in Dundee on 19 December 2002, recruited through Dundee Voluntary Action, an umbrella organisation for voluntary sector organisations in the city.
- Rural Focus Group: held in Castle Douglas on 24 January 2003, recruited through Dumfries and Galloway Council.
- Black and Minority Ethnic Focus Group: held in Kirkcaldy on 27 January 2003, recruited through FRAE Fife, a thematic Social Inclusion Partnership that promotes the interests of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people in Fife.
- Older People Focus Group: held in Edinburgh on 31 January 2003, recruited through the Edinburgh Elderly Forum, a voluntary body comprising representatives of the city’s elderly groups which is co-ordinated by City of Edinburgh Council.
- Low Income Focus Group: held in Glasgow on 4 February 2003, recruited through the Poverty Alliance.

A planned focus group involving people with disabilities was scheduled to take place at the Centre for Independent Living, Glasgow on 17 January 2003. Unfortunately, due to staff absences, the Centre was unable to organise recruitment of participants for that date. Efforts to organise a replacement group in Edinburgh through the disability organisation UPDATE were unsuccessful due to recruitment difficulties attributed to what was described as ‘consultation fatigue’.

Processing Focus Group Evidence

Each focus group was recorded using audio equipment. Participants were reassured that this was to help ensure an accurate record was made of the discussion and that they would not be personally identified in any way in the final research report. The focus group transcripts were used to establish general themes emerging from the different groups and to draw conclusions relating to the main research questions contained in the topic guide.
Limitations of Focus Groups

It should be noted that focus group research is not intended to be representative of the general population. Focus groups are a qualitative research tool that allow a more in-depth and flexible exploration of the issues under investigation than is possible with quantitative research tools such as statistically representative surveys. Since no effort was made to obtain a representative group of consumers, it cannot be concluded that the views expressed in this report reflect the views of the wider public. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the high degree of consensus in the views expressed by groups comprising individuals from a wide range of backgrounds.
Appendix 2 – Focus Group Topic Guide

Introduction

Facilitators to provide a 5-10 minute introduction to the focus group. This to include broad details about the study (aims and objectives etc), the focus groups in particular and the Scottish Consumer Council. The format of the focus group will be explained to participants. Participants will be told how the sessions will be recorded and reassured about the anonymity that will be applied to their comments.

The context for the discussion will be set. This will include a brief explanation of:
• the Public Performance Reporting framework as it currently stands and the changes that will result from the legislation currently before the Scottish Parliament, which will grant local authorities greater freedom in how they report on their performance; and
• what we mean by describing them as ‘consumers’ of local government services.

Participants will be asked a small number of introductory warm up-questions intended to lead them incrementally towards the core focus group questions. These will include:
• How satisfied are you with the level of service provided by your local authority?
• What is this opinion/perception based on?
• Do you think your council provides you with enough information about what it is doing?

Core Questions

General awareness and understanding of performance information
Are you aware of any performance information published by your local authority? If yes, please describe the kind of information you have seen?

As a consumer, how important do you think it is that local authorities publish information about their performance? Why do you feel this is important/unimportant?

What do you believe should be the purpose of publishing performance information?

Use of performance information
Would you ever use performance information? If yes, for what purpose?
- as a means of finding out more about services?
- to challenge current levels of service provision?
- to hold the council to account for its level of performance?

Type and format of performance information
What performance information should be published by local authorities? (e.g. financial, services provided (inputs), outputs/outcomes etc)

Should consumers be involved in defining the performance measures for local authorities? If yes, how might you foresee this involvement process actually working? Would you like to be involved? If not, who should be involved (if anyone)?
A t present, performance information is published on a council-wide basis. A s a consumer, how much detail would you like see in the performance information published by local authorities?

- by sub-authority area?
- by demographic groups?
- should there be a range of detail that consumers can access according to their level of interest?

(At this point various examples of councils' published performance information will be disseminated for participants' perusal, including that of the host authority.)

H ow relevant and useful would you consider this information to be?
H ow can local authorities publish performance information in a way that makes it easier for you to understand and to use?

- how important is the presentational style of published performance? (e.g. typeface, glossy, use of diagrams etc.)
- how important is it to place the performance information in comparative contexts? (e.g. against targets - which ones?; against other local authorities etc.)
- would you welcome the inclusion of explanatory commentaries alongside the data?
- how important is the language used? (avoidance of jargon etc.)
- how important is it that there is an identified contact point to which you can direct queries about the information?

Getting the information to you
H ow can local authorities disseminate performance information in a way that makes it easier for you to physically access?

- is publication in a local newspaper sufficient?
- are there other published formats that you would find useful?
- should councils use more proactive methods? (e.g. distributing information to all households; holding open days; public meetings; information helplines; placing information on display in community settings such as schools, doctors' surgeries, community centres etc).
- is there a role for the internet and other modern media?

Accuracy of the information
H ow much confidence do you have that the information that councils currently publish provides an accurate reflection of their performance? (If low confidence levels expressed, probe for reasons why.)
W hat, if anything, could be done to increase your confidence in the performance information that is published?

Other methods of ensuring that your council is answerable to you
A side from publishing performance information, how else would you like to see councils being required to justify their performance? (e.g. holding open days; joint officer-councillor surgeries; helplines etc.)

Additional issues/questions may be covered in particular groups to reflect:

- the particular needs of the consumer groups involved; and
- the localities from which they are drawn.

The following organisations were represented at the seminar on Local Government Public Performance Reporting which was held at SCC offices in Glasgow on 4 April 2003.

- Angus Council
- Audit Scotland
- Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)
- Dumfries and Galloway Council
- East Lothian Council
- East Renfrewshire Council
- Fife Council
- Glasgow City Council
- Highland Council
- NHS Quality Improvement Scotland
- North Ayrshire Council
- Queen Margaret University
- RDS Consultancy Service
- Renfrewshire Council
- Scottish Executive
- Scottish Consumer Council
- Scottish Consumer Council Consumer Network
- Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU)
- South Lanarkshire Council
- West Dunbartonshire Council
how do you rate your council?
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how do you rate your council?