Have We Got News For You

A guide to good practice in publishing the local authority performance indicators
promotes proper stewardship of public finances and helps those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
Summary

Each year, the Audit Commission draws up a set of performance indicators to help people judge how well their local authority is performing. All local authorities including police authorities must publish their performance against this set of indicators. During April to December 1994, authorities published the indicators in local newspapers for the first time.

Authorities had a large degree of freedom in the way they published their performance indicators, and used many different formats. The extent to which local authorities fulfilled the spirit of the initiative rather than just the letter of the law is a testament to their commitment to the principles of open and accountable government.

In order to help local authorities improve their publications in future years, the Commission carried out work to assess the effectiveness of these publications. This looked at the experiences of a sample of local authorities (see Appendix) and the impact their publications had on local people. The research revealed some clear messages. These include:

♦ more than one in three of the people who received the performance indicators read at least some of them; and
♦ people find the information interesting if it is presented attractively.

But there was a big variation in the proportions of their populations to which authorities distributed the information. In some cases all households received the information, while in others less than 10 percent received them.

There are good reasons why local authorities should seek to increase the impact of publication of the performance indicators. They can use local publication to tell local people about the availability of their services, the standards of service they can expect and what is being done to improve them. The second year of publication provides a new opportunity to show, through year-on-year comparisons, how performance levels have changed. The Commission's research shows there is a correlation between how well informed people feel and their satisfaction with their authority.

There is much that local authorities can do to increase the impact of local publication. Authorities should set targets to reach the maximum proportion of their population which is practicable. There are also lessons which can be learned about which methods of publication most attracted the public's attention. And local authorities should publish the information earlier than in 1994 to make sure it is as fresh as possible.
This report is divided into three parts:
Part 1 outlines the background to local publication of the indicators;
Part 2 describes the key messages which arose from the research; and
Part 3 gives guidance to local authorities.

Fieldwork was carried out by Robertson Bell Associates, but the
conclusions and recommendations are those of the Audit Commission.
This report was written by Peter Chowney of the Audit Support
Directorate of the Commission, under the overall management of Paul
Vevers, Associate Director. The Commission welcomes comments on this
report and these should be sent to Paul Vevers at the Audit Commission,
1 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PN.
Obligations and freedoms

1. When local authorities publish the Audit Commission’s performance indicators, there are certain criteria they must fulfil. These are:
   ♦ they must publish all the information prescribed by the Audit Commission;
   ♦ they must publish by 31 December of the relevant year (i.e. within nine months of the end of the financial year to which the indicators refer);
   ♦ they must publish in a newspaper circulating in their area;
   ♦ the information must be understandable without reference to other material; and
   ♦ the information must be grouped in the same way as in the Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Direction (known as the Direction) which prescribes the indicators.

2. Beyond these requirements and subject to their general legal obligations, local authorities are free to publish what they want in whatever way they think is most appropriate. Publications can be as long or as short as the authority decides. Other material can be included to explain what the indicators mean or to explain why performance is at a particular level. Authorities can include additional performance indicators or can promote other initiatives which they think are important, such as local charters or service standards. They can include graphics, photographs, cartoons, colour or any other device to make the publication look more interesting. They can even change the wording of the Audit Commission indicators, as long as the meaning and definition are still clearly the same.

3. There are good reasons why local authorities should take advantage of their freedoms and communicate the performance information as widely and attractively as possible:
   ♦ more widely circulated and better quality publications are more cost effective in communicating with the public;
   ♦ local people have a right to know how their authority is performing and how their money is being spent;
   ♦ effective publications improve the local image of the authority; and
   ♦ local authorities can use local publication of the performance indicators to get across their own messages, enhancing local accountability.

4. There is a further reason for exploiting these freedoms. Local authorities need to tell local people about the availability of their services, the standards of service which they can expect and what is being done to improve them. This helps make local people more aware of the services
which authorities provide. Our research showed there was a correlation between the degree to which people feel well informed and their satisfaction with their authority (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1
The correlation between public satisfaction with local services and how well informed people are about them.

Where people were better informed about council services they were more satisfied with the local authority...

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork

The story so far

5. In Spring 1994 the Commission held three national conferences to discuss ways of presenting and publishing the indicators, inviting speakers from local authorities and from local newspapers. We also published a guide called *Read All About It* which demonstrated the possible formats which local authorities could use. At that stage the advice was hypothetical since publication of the information had not taken place and the ideas were based on 'expert opinion', although some research had been carried out into a publication produced by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council a year in advance of the statutory publication date.

6. The London Borough of Brent was the first local authority to publish its 1993/94 performance indicators in July 1994, closely followed by Devon and Cornwall Police Authority and Wyre Borough Council.

7. All but one of the 497 local authorities included in the initiative published by the statutory deadline, although the majority published close to the deadline, in December (Exhibit 2). Considering this was the first year, and the process was more complicated than most people working in local government had anticipated, this was a commendable achievement. But not only did local authorities publish the information on time, a large majority also put a lot of effort into creating imaginative and comprehensive publications which presented much more than just the bare figures. The extent to which authorities fulfilled the spirit of the initiative rather than just the letter of the law is a testament to the commitment of local authorities and those working in them to the principles of open and accountable government.
8. On behalf of the Audit Commission, Robertson Bell Associates carried out research in eight local authorities (see Appendix) to assess what the public thought of their local authorities’ publications, as well as publications from other authorities. Researchers used quantitative surveys involving around three hundred people in each local authority area, as well as qualitative ‘contact groups’ to assess people’s views in more depth. They also showed a selection of publications to groups of ‘experts’ in local and central government, public relations professionals and national consumer groups. In addition, the Audit Commission’s press office conducted a review of the local media coverage of the performance indicators at the time of national publication.

Exhibit 2
Timing of local publication

Most authorities waited until close to the December statutory deadline before publishing...

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork
Part 2  Key messages from the research

9. Around 37 per cent of the people receiving performance indicator publications read at least part of the information. This was fairly consistent throughout the eight authorities included in our research and is greater than many people working in local government had anticipated. So although few people contacted their local authority in response to the publications, these low response rates do not indicate a lack of interest. However, there was a wide variation in the proportion of residents who received copies of the publication. Some authorities distributed the information to all households but others published in ways which resulted in less than ten per cent of the population receiving the information.

10. In addition to local publication, there was a second and significant round of local publicity about the local authority performance indicators when the Commission published the results nationally in two stages in March and April 1995. As well as major national media coverage, some 450 local newspapers and the majority of local radio and television stations covered this by highlighting the results of local authorities in their own regions. And even more local newspapers, television and radio stations covered the police and fire service national publications. This additional publicity will have boosted still further the percentage of people who saw the performance indicators.

11. The overall message to emerge from our research is that people want to receive performance information and find it interesting if local authorities present it in a clear and accessible way. And even people who chose not to look at the indicators still thought that they should be published. Eight out of ten people were in favour of publishing this information, indicating a strong level of public support for authorities' work on the initiative. This provides a good base for building local interest in performance information in the future.

12. A number of themes emerged from the research concerning the public's likes and dislikes about the way local authorities published their performance indicators. These can be summarised as follows:

♦ The information needs to be as fresh as possible. In areas where the local authority published its performance indicators earlier, local people were more likely to look at the indicators. If information is published as late as December, nine months after the end of the relevant financial year, there is a risk that people may be suspicious of the authority's motives for delaying publication.

♦ Using the publications for good publicity or for promoting the image of the authority as an efficient and effective organisation needs to be tempered with recognition of areas where improvement is needed.
Openly admitting problems and telling people how the authority intends to address these makes the good news more believable. If the tone is self-congratulatory, people are less likely to believe information on genuinely good performance.

♦ Design is important, with layout and the use of colour significant factors in getting people to read the information. The most successful publications use devices to grab the reader's attention. The nature of the publication is such that, if not presented attractively, people can be put off reading it at first glance. Overcoming this first hurdle is crucial; once the readers are hooked into the publication, the information itself will keep them interested.

♦ Unbroken pages of numbers without explanation or comment are difficult to digest. Many people find numbers intimidating and the public are often sceptical of official figures. The data needs to be explained and people need to feel reassured that the numbers reveal the truth.

♦ Unbroken blocks of text are also believed to be misleading. Long explanations of performance with no numerical data are difficult to follow and make it difficult to find the relevant information. People thought that important information about performance could get hidden. A mixture of text and numbers is far more successful.

♦ Publications should be locally appropriate. People in Barnet were used to and expected a more glossy (and more expensive) style of publication from the council than in either Newcastle or Somerset.

♦ Additional performance information based on local indicators devised by the authority can help to fill the gaps in the statutory indicators and can help the authority to get across a particular message. But care needs to be taken to avoid overloading people with numbers.
The information can be more accessible if it is mixed with other relevant 'human interest' stories, for example a 'day-in-the-life' story of a social worker or the history of tenant participation in a housing project. But this kind of additional information needs to be relevant. Stories which are not relevant to the indicators are confusing.

Authorities which used plain language, both in explanatory text and in the wording of the indicators, were able to get their message across more effectively. In the first year, many authorities used language which the public found bureaucratic and over-serious.

There are some turn-ons and turn-offs which emerged from the research. Pictures of local landmarks, children and cartoons were all successful at getting people to look twice at the publication. Pictures of local councillors, council officers and the council chamber were not.

Local authorities need to 'lighten up'. This was a consistent message from all public groups questioned in the qualitative research. A more light-hearted approach need not undermine the value of the information and means the public are more likely to read it.

The overall message from the research with the public is that they are, in some cases, initially reluctant to look at performance information. But when the individual indicators are brought to their attention, they begin to get interested and start to look at and to comment critically on the other data within the publications. The most successful publications are those which help to overcome this initial barrier. Members of the public are not used to seeing this kind of information. Authorities need to make the information interesting and make sure it has an immediate visual impact.
Part 3  How to improve local performance indicator publications

13. The messages outlined in the previous section can help local authorities to improve their publications during 1995. This section provides a general guide to the points which they should consider when assembling their publications. Examples of the approaches adopted by several different authorities are included in the centre of this document. Particular points of interest about these examples are raised later in the text.

14. Before embarking on the process of producing their performance indicator publications, local authorities should decide what they intend to achieve as a result of publishing the indicators. For example, they should decide:

♦ What are the key messages they want to communicate, and how will this be achieved?
♦ What is the maximum proportion of the population they can reach?
♦ What image do they want to portray?

15. The more clearly these objectives are stated, the easier it will be to produce a coherent and cost-effective publication. Discussions with council officers revealed that as the project progresses, different departments will begin to make more and often conflicting demands for what they want included in the publication. This is often more of a problem in large councils, where powerful departments may want to have a greater influence on how their performance information is presented than in smaller councils or in police or fire authorities. Setting clear objectives and getting these agreed at a high level within the authority will make it easier for local authorities to keep control of the final publication, keep within the project plan and produce a publication which has been conceived and designed around a single corporate theme, rather than allowed to grow as a result of separate and conflicting departmental pressures. The experience of local authorities is that this will be easier to achieve if one officer is responsible for fulfilling the objectives and if that officer has editorial control over all aspects of the publication.

Local authorities should:
♦ set clear objectives for the publication in terms of how they can maximise the proportion of the population they intend to reach and the messages they want to communicate;
make sure these objectives are agreed at a high level within the organisation; and
♦ assign editorial control to one named officer.
Project management

16. The project needs to be planned out well in advance, stages leading up to publication need to be clearly identified and enough time allowed to avoid rushing final production of the publication. An example of an outline project plan is contained in Box 1. The project plan should be agreed with external auditors so they can carry out the audit before local publication. A lesson from the experiences of both auditors and authorities is that a project manager with sufficient seniority to make sure all council departments achieve each of the deadlines needs to be appointed. This may be the same person as the officer with editorial control, depending on skills and abilities.

Box 1
London Borough of Brent
Devising a publication project plan...

♦ Negotiations begun with local newspapers     Mid-April
♦ Rate and overall size of insert (eight pages) agreed with Wembley Observer     30 April
♦ Drafting text for publication begun     Mid-May
♦ Return performance information to Central Policy Unit     31 May
♦ Information collated and passed to auditors for verification     30 June
♦ Final design and layout of publication begun     1 July
♦ Final text for publication passed to Wembley Observer     8 July
♦ Publication in Wembley Observer     14 July

Source: London Borough of Brent.

17. During the first year of publication, the majority of authorities published close to the 31 December deadline. Given that authorities now have some experience of the process, they can reasonably be expected to aim to publish by 31 October. All authorities should develop project plans culminating in publication by that date. If authorities are concerned about how they compare with their neighbours, they should approach their neighbours to share information in advance of publication rather than postpone their own publication until after their neighbours have published.

18. Local authorities should consider the performance indicator publications as part of a broader communications strategy. There may be other publications which the authority is producing just before, or just after, it publishes the performance indicators. Authorities may be able to use these to give pre-publicity to the performance indicators, or to run follow-up stories on how the authority compares with neighbouring authorities, how the authority intends to improve performance or what new targets it intends to set. Consideration of this more comprehensive strategy will assist decisions about the style and content of the publication and will help to increase the number of people who read the indicators.
Deciding what kind of publication to use

19. The legal advice which the Audit Commission has received is that local authorities must publish in a paid-for newspaper. However, they can publish their performance indicators in other ways in addition to using a paid-for newspaper. Many authorities chose to use a paid-for newspaper to fulfil their statutory obligation, while using a council newspaper or annual report circulated to every household as the main vehicle for publishing the indicators. Some local authorities have questioned the value of publishing the indicators in a paid-for newspaper where this may not be an effective way of communicating with local people in their area. The Audit Commission has approached the Department of the Environment (DoE) to ask if this requirement can be changed. The DoE is currently exploring the possibility of introducing amending legislation at a convenient opportunity to give local authorities the choice of publishing this information in free newspapers or in their own publication.

20. In many areas it is likely that a combination of types of publication will be required to reach the largest practicable number of people. When considering the appropriateness of different kinds of local publications, there are three issues which local authorities need to consider together:

(i) How many people get the published documents.
   This will depend on the distribution of the publication.

(ii) How many people getting the documents read them.
   This will depend on whether publication takes place in a paid-for newspaper or free publication and on the appearance of the publication.

(iii) How much control over design the authority wishes to have.

When considering these issues, authorities will also have to take account of the overall cost and cost effectiveness of the alternatives.
Distribution

21. For both statutory publication and any supplementary publication the authority is considering, they should find out how widely local commercial newspapers – whether distributed free or bought in newsagents – are circulated. Where the newspaper publisher produces figures, attempts should be made to get these independently verified. If no independent figures exist, one simple way to achieve this is through a questionnaire to those members of the authority's staff who live in the authority area, asking them if they buy or receive the relevant publication. Although authorities' workforces vary from 500 to 50,000 staff, they will often represent a reasonable cross-section of the local population.

22. Many paid-for and free newspapers are published on more than one day each week and often have a larger circulation on one particular day (usually nearer the end of the week). When using commercial newspapers, authorities should make sure that publication takes place in the day’s issue with the largest circulation.

23. Where the authority decides to distribute its publication independently, it can specify exactly how it wants the publication distributed. This may be to every household or to a fixed percentage of households, or to a higher percentage of households in urban areas than in rural areas. But authorities should write a detailed and precise specification for distribution contracts to make sure they get exactly what they want and to maximise the cost effectiveness of distribution. And they should again make attempts to verify independently claims made by the distribution company. It is unlikely that any but the largest local authorities will have dedicated in-house resources for distributing council publications. But some authorities have constructed ingenious 'deals' with other council service providers or contractors. For example, council contractors may already have systems in place for distributing leaflets to all households about changes in refuse collection dates.

24. Authorities which produce their own publications can also use commercial newspapers for distribution only, tucking their own publication inside the commercial newspaper. Providing that at least one of the newspapers is paid-for, this can also count as the statutory publication. Before adopting this approach, authorities should first consider whether they have sufficient skills in-house to produce an effective publication. Designing the publication is dealt with later in this report.

Readership

25. People buying a paid-for newspaper have done so because they or someone else in their household intends to read at least part of it. The research shows that people will not necessarily read freesheets or council
Example 1 Using cartoons (see paragraph 35)

Birmingham City Council

Cartoons can grab the reader’s attention and explain or add to the performance indicators.
Example 2 Using a mixture of textual and numerical data (see paragraph 35)

London borough of Islington

Text can be used to explain numerical information.
Example 3 Using colour (see paragraph 35)
Kent County Council
Colour can make the information easier to find and the overall appearance of the publication more attractive.

How did KCC do

Dealing with the Public
- How quickly we answer the telephone
  (a) The authority’s target for answering calls, excluding 999 calls: 80% in 15 seconds.
  (b) How performance was monitored: Electronically.
  All calls monitored at central exchange plus a sample week at each of 7 local offices. In total 2.8 million calls monitored between 8am and 6pm.
- How the performance against the target: 93.5%.
  Based on a sample of 700,000 (excluding direct-dial). Average time to answer on all 2.8 million calls (including direct-dial) was 12 seconds.
- A MORI survey of 1,200 Kent residents showed that of those who telephoned/visited KCC during the last year, 91% found staff helpful and friendly, and 86% were satisfied with the outcome of their query.
- How quickly we reply to letters
  (a) The authority’s target(s) for answering letters: 5 & 10 days.
  (b) How performance was monitored: Random sample of 24,600 letters from all service departments.
- How the performance against the target(s): 74% & 83%.
  5 departments, 74% within target, 2 departments, 83% within target.
- Complaints to a Local Authority Ombudsman (Local Commissioner)
  (a) The number of complaints considered by an Ombudsman: 75.
  (b) The number which were classified as:
    (i) Local settlement: 8.
    (ii) Maladministration with no injustice: 0.
    (iii) Maladministration with injustice: 8.
  (c) How good is the complaints system?
    (a) The authority’s definition of a complaint: An allegation by a member of the public that the County Council has done something which the complainant feels it ought not to have done, or that the County Council has not done something which the complainant feels it ought to have done.
    (b) The answers to these questions:
      (1) Does the authority have a written policy and procedure for dealing with complaints which covers all services and which is up to date and available to members of the public?
        Yes.
      (2) Does it contain information on the procedure for making complaints?
        Yes.
      (3) Does it contain a clear allocation of responsibility for receiving and investigating complaints and overall responsibility for managing the arrangements for dealing with complaints?
        Yes.
      (4) Does it contain time limits and target(s) for dealing with complaints?
        Yes.
      (5) Does it specify that, when time limits and targets are not met, complaints must be informed of the delay, the reasons for delay and revised targets?
        Yes.
      (6) Does it specify that those complaining in writing must receive a written explanation of the outcome of the complaint?
        Yes.
      (7) Is there a follow-up procedure if the complainant is not satisfied with a response from the department to which the complaint relates?
        Yes.
      (8) Does the authority have a written policy on remedies?
        Yes.
      (9) Is there a system for reviewing the causes of complaints to ensure that the avoidable problems do not recur?
        Yes for Social Services, Education and Fire.

Previous years the kind of facts and figures shown on the next three pages have been presented with different articles throughout Kent Reports. This year, and from now on, we are required by the Audit Commission, the Government’s independent local authority watchdog, to publish these ‘performance indicators’ in this more formal way.

Most have been verified by KCC’s own auditors, but some (marked *) are provisional or not yet available because of later deadlines. The complete performance indicators will be published in local newspapers later this year, but if you would like your own copy please call the number below.

Of course statistics can tell only part of the story and it is difficult to draw conclusions about services without knowing more about local circumstances. If you would like more background information on any performance indicators please call, in the first instance:
Mike Ashley (0622) 694039

Dealing with the Public (continued)

- Is KCC wide? Yes for Arts & Libraries, Highways and Social Services, plus Chief Executive’s report.

How easy is it for disabled persons to use council buildings?
- The number of the authority’s buildings open to the public: 159.
- The number of such buildings in which all public areas are accessible to disabled persons (as per regulation M.0): None.

Building Regulation M applies to new buildings only, but is now applied to all 159. On a survey of 12 premises, 38% of the regulations were met. 1992/94 priority was to improve entrance areas, eg doorways and ramps.

General Provision

- Net expenditure per head of population (figures subject to final allocation)

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<th>Service</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>£129.54</td>
<td>£129.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>£100.46*</td>
<td>£100.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries &amp; museums</td>
<td>£10.84*</td>
<td>£10.84*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>£92.49</td>
<td>£92.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>£22.79</td>
<td>£22.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highways</td>
<td>£32.93</td>
<td>£32.93</td>
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<td>Public transport</td>
<td>£2.73</td>
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<td>Consumer protection</td>
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<td>£2.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning &amp; economic development</td>
<td>£6.47*</td>
<td>£6.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse disposal</td>
<td>£6.54</td>
<td>£6.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street cleaning</td>
<td>£0.16</td>
<td>£0.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport &amp; recreation</td>
<td>£0.51*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other costs and services</td>
<td>£43.74*</td>
<td>£43.74*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capital charges</td>
<td>£45.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest receipts (credit)</td>
<td>£61.17*</td>
<td>£61.17*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government grants (credit)</td>
<td>£755.30*</td>
<td>£755.30*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in reserves &amp; balances</td>
<td>£7.49</td>
<td>£7.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>£624.89*</td>
<td>£624.89*</td>
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NB: Not actual size
Example 4 using local images (see paragraph 35)

Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council

Using a well known local image can help create a sense of ownership and local relevance.

HOW NEWCASTLE PERFORMS
THE ANNUAL REPORT 1993/94

A MAJOR FORCE IN THE LIFE OF THE CITY

In spite of the continuing need to reduce expenditure and the loss of functions, the City Council remains a major force in the life of the city. The overall revenue budget was nearly £220 million in 1993/4 and the Authority spent nearly £50 million on capital works. The table on this page shows the breadth and scope of essential services we provide.

The City Council's role goes beyond delivering services. Along with other partners in the public and private sector the City Council seeks to advance the interests of people who live and work in the city and contribute to the welfare of the region as a whole.

We are committed to protecting budgets for people who are most vulnerable in our society and will continue to improve our services as best we can.

In 1993/4 the City made £8 million worth of cuts and efficiency savings. Since 1999 the Council has cut its budget by £40 million, nearly 20%. Cuts of this size cannot be achieved by efficiency improvements on their own, much as we might wish. The cuts are bound to affect people who are most dependent on our services, the young, the elderly and those who need support. Further cuts are likely to be necessary with £20 million being the target over the next three years.

Financially the year ended on a better note. We secured an additional £7 million grant per year for the City by persuading Government to take unemployment and other economic deprivation factors into account when allocating grant to local councils. In total £38 million was gained for the North by this change. This additional grant helped in reducing council tax bills in 1994. At the beginning of this year the Council set money aside for much needed repairs to our buildings, including schools, and for future projects to help areas badly hit by unemployment and job loss, such as North Benwell and the East area of Newcastle, affected by Swan Hunters.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Under the Government's Citizen's Charter, the City Council must collect and publish certain performance information against a set of performance indicators defined by the Audit Commission. By law, this information must be published in a local newspaper.

The City Council has chosen to publish these performance indicators in this supplement. The Citizen's Charter indicators are set out in clearly marked boxes so they are easy to identify. Alongside the indicators is our Annual Report for 1993/94. This gives a broad picture of the work and achievements of the Council's major services. It includes our annual financial statements.

We welcome your comments and questions.

An Audit Commission publication called "How is Your Council Performing?" explains more about the Citizen's Charter indicators. Copies are available on request at the Civic Centre and at public libraries in Newcastle.

NB: Not actual size
Example 5  Using eye-catching layout and graphics (see paragraph 35)

Wycombe District Council

Laying out the information in an unusual way can help attract the reader's attention.
Example 6  Using a large typeface (see paragraph 37)
London Borough of Barnet
This is an example of 14 point type, the size of print recommended by RNIB

The provision of an Educational Service

As a Local Education Authority (LEA), your council regards education as a high priority - and as these performance indicators show, the authority's high levels of achievement continued last year.

Nearly 4,800 children under the age of five attended council maintained schools - nearly 60 per cent of all the three and four year olds in the borough. It cost nearly £9.5m to provide education to these under fives.

The council continues to provide special services for children with special educational needs. Last year, over 880 children came within this category, 2.11 per cent of the total school population. Over 540 children were placed in special schools - 1.29 per cent of all children.

It costs the council £3,610 a year per pupil to provide education for those aged 16 and over, £2,526 for secondary school pupils under 16, £1,920 for primary school pupils five years old and over and £1,974 for nursery and primary school children under five.

Education before statutory school age

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>The number of children under 5 in LEA maintained schools</td>
<td>4,790</td>
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<td>Half-time attenders counted as full-time, only LEA maintained schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>These children as a percentage of all 3 and 4 year olds</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The cost of educating these children</td>
<td>£9,455,460</td>
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School Places and Admissions

<table>
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<th>Class</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools</td>
<td>5%</td>
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The percentage of pupils admitted in excess of schools' normal capacity in:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children with Special Educational Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The number of children with statements of special educational needs</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of all children with statements</td>
<td>2.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of statements issued during the year</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of all statements prepared within 6 months</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of children placed by the LEA in special schools</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: Actual size
Example 7 Using additional information (see paragraph 40)
Devon and Cornwall Police Authority

Human interest stories can be used to make the information more accessible.

Coping in a crisis

Réal-life 999 scenes on television may appear exciting, riveting and dramatic - but in reality they are not. They can be extremely traumatic for those involved and especially for the emergency services, who are called on to deal with every eventuality, regardless of the danger of horror.

It is difficult for anyone, no matter how much they have been exposed to television dramas and reconstructed incidents, to appreciate the importance of having a reassuring, professional voice at the other end of the line.

Our surveys show that 91% of callers were satisfied with our performance in dealing with 999 calls. This is encouraging for us and yet we don't wish to be seen to be blowing our own trumpet - we will continue to monitor and improve this service wherever possible.

Steve Jamieson works as a senior communications officer in the Force Operations Room at Headquarters. To an outsider, answering emergency telephone calls may seem a very stressful occupation. How does he cope?

'I've worked in this environment for about 15 years and have dealt with some very traumatic incidents. It is very difficult to explain the reality of being the first port of call in an emergency. We try to keep the person down using a reassuring helpful voice because we must always be in control of the conversation in order to get all the information necessary - lives may depend on it.'

Although mayhem is reigning all around, the police operator must remain in control throughout the confusion - directing the services to the scene as soon as possible. Steve's experience is that in serious incidents the pressure becomes even more intense.

'The call may take us 10 seconds to answer but we can be involved with the incident for several hours so we rely on teamwork, especially when a wealth of callers ring in at the same time.

'It takes time and experience to handle such calls but it's an element of pressure we can not escape. We try not to take it home with us at the end of the day - but that's not always possible.'

Although many incidents can be distressing, operators approach each call in a professional and systematic way.

Often we can reflect on what we have just dealt with but at the time, and time is critical, we have to concentrate our minds on sending resources as quickly as possible, rather than on the horror we have just heard.

The Force has set a priority in providing operators with the most modern equipment to help deal with every call. Touch-screen telephones, networked computer systems and comfortable surroundings all streamline the process. The need for operators to keep abreast of new developments is critical.

'The new system is very powerful and will be of great benefit to everyone. However good this technology is we still need highly trained and experienced staff to work it. Whatever the changes, it will always be a very challenging and rewarding job!' says Steve.

98.9% of non-999 calls were answered within our target of 30 seconds: 77.7% of letters were acknowledged or answered within 5 days (September 1993 to March 1994)

Tackling crime head-on

There have been several major operations involving crime sweeps which covered the whole region.

The Force is committed to reassuring the public by tackling crime head-on. The fundamental aim of these initiatives is to target known criminals, bring them to book, and recover stolen property.

Operation "Restitution"

In December 1993 a crime crackdown was launched. We recovered £15,350 worth of stolen property; £4,425 worth of drugs. There were 160 arrests; 217 offenders directed.

Home searches in Plymouth, Exeter, Torbay and almost every main town throughout the region. A follow-up operation took place in February.
We recovered £229,350 worth of stolen property; £32,905 worth of drugs. There were 215 arrests; 411 offenders directed.

Operation "Overture"

A series of smaller operations have been undertaken as a direct result of public concern. They have covered such issues as fly-tipping, burglary and crime prevention. Future operations are planned to counter drink drivers, burglary, thefts from vehicles and other areas which are brought to our attention by local communities.

These operations will continue alongside the crime prevention initiatives which are already ongoing in partnership with the community.
Example 8 Including past performance (see paragraph 47)
London Borough of Wandsworth

A balanced picture is important - authorities should highlight performance which has deteriorated as well as performance which has improved.
newspapers which are circulated direct to people's homes. Many people do not even remember receiving them. On average, around half of the people known to have received free publications remembered looking at them. For freesheets or council publications distributed direct to people's homes, the number of people looking at them will depend on how well recognised or eye-catching the publication is. However, there is no difference between paid-for and free publications in terms of the number of people looking at the performance indicators once they had decided to read at least part of the publication.

26. There may also be other publications which authorities could use, such as an 'A-Z' of council services. Publishing in an 'A-Z' has the additional advantage that people are likely to keep the publication longer, as it is likely to contain other useful information which people will keep for reference purposes. But such documents do not have the immediacy of newsprint. Again, authorities need to make decisions about which combination of publications to use in the light of the effect they want to have.

27. For the three authorities in our sample which used both commercial newspapers and annual reports circulated to households for publishing the indicators, annual reports proved to be relatively more expensive because their production costs were higher than a newspaper insert. However, most local authorities using annual reports to publish their performance indicators already produce and circulate these documents. In this case, the additional costs involved will be no more than the cost of the design and layout of the additional pages and, if the publication is widely circulated, it will be a cost effective way of supplementing a statutory publication which may reach only a small number of residents.

28. But whatever method is used as the primary vehicle for publishing the performance indicators, spending less on publication and distribution may be a false economy if fewer people receive and read the indicators. Although some authorities spent relatively little on publishing the performance indicators, the cost of the publication was high when measured in terms of the number of people who read the indicators (Exhibit 3, overleaf). But higher spending should always be justified by this cost per reader being lower.
29. So there are two separate costs which authorities should consider:

♦ the cost of getting the publication to people (cost per person receiving the publication); and
♦ the cost of producing the publication (cost per copy of the publication).

Investing more in the first of these guarantees that more people will receive the publication, but it does not mean they will look at the performance data. Investing more in the second may mean that the publication grabs people’s attention, but this is ineffective if they do not receive the publication. Authorities need to consider all these points when allocating their budget. And in particular, they need to think about whether extra money spent on production is cost effective in terms of overcoming people’s reluctance to look at performance data.

**Controlling design**

30. The degree of control which the authority wishes to have over the design of the publication is also an important factor in deciding which approach to take. There are broadly three approaches. Local authorities can:

♦ produce their own publications;
♦ commission an insert in a local paper, for example forming the centre pages of the paper; or
♦ insert an advertisement in a newspaper.

31. The first of these methods allows the authority to retain total control of the publication and also allows further copies to be produced and distributed by other means (for example at council offices).
32. The second of these methods proved to be the most popular way of using a commercial newspaper. This method has the advantage of keeping costs down (because the newspaper is responsible for both production and distribution) while maintaining a degree of control over design. It may also be possible to produce 'run-on' copies for distribution through other sources, although this must be taken into account in the design and layout of the insert. This method is more restrictive than a completely independent publication – there will be restrictions on the size of the publication, the use of colour and type of paper at the very least.

33. The third method, placing an advertisement in the newspaper, was used by a relatively small number of authorities. The amount of information which councils are required to publish means that it is difficult to include all of it in a display advertisement unless the advertisement is so large that it costs more than a separate insert produced at a specially negotiated rate. In general, councils only used this method for a minimal advertisement to fulfil the statutory requirement to publish in a paid-for newspaper, supplemented with a more comprehensive authority publication.

In deciding which publication to use, local authorities should:
♦ make sure publications are cost effective in terms of the cost per person reading the information;
♦ verify circulation claims by newspapers to assess the effectiveness of these and other distribution methods;
♦ compare the potential combinations of publications and choose the lowest cost combination which will enable them to fulfil their statutory obligations and achieve readership by the largest practicable proportion of their population; and
♦ select a publication method which allows the authority adequate control over the design of the publication.

34. Although the distribution of the publication is of prime importance, money spent on distribution will be wasted if the design of the publication is off-putting. But not all authorities have design expertise. Authorities with little experience of publishing information are likely to need professional help. This does not have to involve possibly expensive design consultants. Some local authorities negotiated design services as part of a publication package with local newspapers (Box 2, overleaf).
Wyre Borough Council: Using external design resources...

Wyre Council had little experience of publishing information, but were able to finalise their results relatively easily and publish early. But this meant that the Council had no examples to follow. So they decided to approach the Blackpool Evening Gazette to design and publish their performance information. The Evening Gazette was enthusiastic about the idea and quoted Wyre Council £4,000 for design and publication, including 5,000 extra copies for distribution at council offices. This represented very good value for money compared to costs incurred by other councils. The Evening Gazette also ran a front page story on the indicators, which helped to publicise them. The resulting publication was popular with local people. Because it had been designed and edited by the Evening Gazette, people were comfortable with the style which felt familiar and recognisable.

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork

35. Publications need to grab the reader's attention and make them look at the performance indicators. This can be done by:

♦ using cartoons.

These can be used very effectively if the cartoons themselves explain or add to the performance indicators (Example 1, centre spread).
Have We Got News for You

- breaking up the indicators with explanatory text. Text can be used to explain the indicators and present numerical information in a more accessible and attractive way (Example 2, centre spread).

- using colour. Carefully chosen and balanced colour combinations can make the information easier to find and the overall appearance of the publication more attractive (Example 3, centre spread).

- using an attractive or locally relevant image. Using a well known local image with which local people are familiar can help create a sense of ownership and local relevance (Example 4, centre spread).

- using eye-catching graphics and layout. Laying out the information in an unusual way and linking this to explanatory graphics can help to attract the reader's attention and make the information more accessible (Example 5, centre spread).

36. Overall, our research shows that the more visually interesting and less cluttered and confusing the document looks, the more likely people are to read it. There needs to be a mix of text and tabular data. And authorities should not feel that they have to make the document look too 'official' because of its statutory nature. The important thing is that people read it and use it.

37. The Royal National Institute for the Blind recommends the use of fourteen point type. This is demonstrated in the London Borough of Barnet's Annual Report (Example 6, centre spread). Although using type this large does require more space, members of the public found that Barnet's large type made the publication clearer and easier to follow, for fully-sighted as well as partially-sighted people. Mid-Glamorgan County Council also made their Annual Report, including the performance indicators, available on tape for blind people.
38. Local authorities should use these devices selectively because most of them increase the overall size of the publication. And the size of the publication is an issue which needs to be considered carefully. Publications by district councils varied from less than half a page of a tabloid size newspaper to eight pages or more. Very small publications tend to be cluttered, dull and difficult to read. Very long ones tend to be off-putting because people do not want to wade through a lot of information which may not always be relevant to them. Whilst it is understandable and positive that officers responsible for specific services within authorities will want as much space as possible, these demands have to be balanced against the need to contain the overall size of the document. This is a further argument for appointing an editor with control over the design and content of the publication.

39. The language used in the publication also needs careful consideration. Most local authorities incorrectly think that they have to use the precise wording of the indicators as published by the Audit Commission. In fact, they can rewrite them or provide further explanation, providing they do not change their meaning. Publications should use plain language (Box 3).

**Box 3 Using plain language**

Performance indicators presented in plain language have a greater impact than indicators which contain jargon.

The authority's target for reliability of the refuse collection service:

Watford Borough Council:
'We will collect your household refuse once a week, taking care to replace your bin, put the lid back on, clear up any spillage and close your gate. If we do not collect from you, for example if the gate is locked, we will put a note through your door giving the reason why and pick up the following week.'

Another council:
'99.96% based on the permitted defect rate of 720 points per four week period (as specified in the CCT refuse collection contract) divided by the number of bins emptied in a year.'
When designing their publications, local authorities should:

- use pictures, cartoons and other devices to break up the text;
- use a mixture of numerical and textual information;
- use colour where possible to make the publication attractive and the information more accessible;
- use locally appropriate or eye-catching images to grab people's attention; and
- avoid bureaucratic language and make the publication easy to understand by using plain language.

Deciding what to include in the publication

**Using additional information**

40. Most local authorities included additional information in their performance indicator publications. This included other performance indicators, 'human interest' stories based on authority services covered by the indicators, 'good news' stories based on the indicators and information on the scope and availability of services. 'Human interest' stories were used effectively by Devon and Cornwall Police Authority to make the performance information more interesting (Example 7, centre spread). Although the range of potential additional information to be included is very wide, some guidelines do emerge from the research:

- additional information should be relevant to the performance indicators;
- it should enhance the indicators and illustrate the numerical data;
- it should be interesting; and
- it should not be self-congratulatory.

41. Our research with the public shows that amusing anecdotal stories woven around performance indicators work well; lengthy passages from senior figures within the authority do not. Authorities need to think carefully about the purpose and effect of additional information and what sort of information local people will want to read. Unread messages are useless.

42. Many authorities also included blocks of text in relevant minority languages informing people of the availability of the information in translation. However, these blocks of text were usually at or near the back of the publication. People who cannot read English are unlikely to get this far – text in translation needs to be at or near the front of publications if it is to be effective.

Making promises

43. One communication technique which impressed local people was the clear statement of promises of future achievement. This approach counterbalanced a degree of scepticism about past achievements.
Although no authorities included in our research did this as part of their performance indicator publications, some councils do this in other publications. For example Redditch Borough Council has published promises about specific performance targets:

♦ 'The Council will reduce rent arrears to 4.5 per cent by 1 April 1998'.
♦ 'The Council will ensure that 80 per cent of planning applications are processed within eight weeks'.

And about promises relating to specific local projects:

♦ 'The Council will provide a car park in Astwood Bank for residents and other users'.
♦ 'The Council will introduce a multi-gym facility at Arrow Vale Sports Centre'.

44. This kind of promise relating to specific local projects is especially useful because local people can see for themselves whether their local authority has met its target. But for this to work effectively the authority does have to be sure it can deliver its promises – the public will expect them to report on the achievement of promises in the following year.

Using comparative data

45. The Commission's research shows that the public like comparisons which give them something to measure current performance against. In particular, they like year-on-year comparisons. The second year of local publication provides a big opportunity for authorities to show how their performance has changed. This should be the main emphasis for local publication in 1995 and beyond.

46. Because our research was based on the first year's publication, there is little evidence about effective ways to publish comparative data. Our research indicates that the inclusion of more than one year's data needs to be careful highlighted or people will not necessarily notice it. Authorities should make it clear which data relates to which year, possibly by colour coding and with explanatory text. Publishing two years' data doubles the amount of information and therefore needs to be supplemented with careful explanation.

47. Once again, a balanced picture is important – authorities should highlight and explain performance which has deteriorated as well as performance which has improved. This was achieved by the London Borough of Wandsworth, who published three years' comparative data (Example 8, centre spread).
Many local authorities included a contact number 'hotline' in their publications. In most cases they received few calls. But this is not an indication of whether or not people read the information or were interested in it. Publishing contact numbers with the information helps to promote the image of accessibility of the authority and creates a direct link between the authority and the public, whether or not people choose to use that link. Since experience shows that councils are likely to get few calls, there are no real cost implications in including a contact number with the performance indicators.

Local people are not used to being asked to comment on their authorities' performance and will need some encouragement to do so. Publications can be made more interactive by asking people to contact the council about specific issues, in addition to just giving a contact number. For example, local people could be encouraged to comment on what they thought specific performance targets should be or whether they thought a particular level of performance was acceptable.

Any publications produced by the authority should be locally appropriate. One way to find out whether they are appropriate is for authorities to conduct their own research (Box 5, overleaf). This could be achieved through, for example:

- detailed follow-up surveys to assess local opinion on publications;
- questions included in existing surveys;
- discussions with local representative groups (local consumer groups, disability groups, tenants and residents' associations, voluntary bodies); and
- consultative groups established by the authority.

Local authorities should:
- include additional information where this is relevant to the performance indicators and makes the publication more interesting;
- include promises of future performance levels which the authority intends to achieve or tasks which it intends to complete;
- publish data comparing their performance for 1994/95 with their performance for 1993/94 for at least a selection of indicators; and
- carry out local surveys or consultation exercises to assess the circulation and effectiveness of their local publications.
Carrying out follow-up research
Leicester City Council...

Leicester City Council has regularly commissioned surveys for several years. As part of this programme, the City Council decided to undertake market research into the readership and impact of performance indicators, which they published as a supplement to a civic newspaper distributed to all city residents in late December 1994.

Around 900 people were questioned on whether they had seen the indicator supplement, how much of it they had read and whether they proposed to keep it. There was also a general question concerning satisfaction with the Council's performance, with questions on which sections of the publication were most and least interesting, various aspects of the publication's design and how well the publication explained the Council's performance.

The sample was broken down by age, gender, ethnic origin, first language, residential tenure, socio-economic group and disability to ensure that the sample was representative of Leicester as a whole and to highlight any differences between different sections of the population.

The research cost around £10,000, excluding in-house design and analysis costs.

Results of the research showed that 26 per cent of those who remembered receiving the publication read at least some of it. Council officers feel that the research was worthwhile – ‘we needed to see if we'd got it right’. It confirmed their decision to publish in their civic newspaper and gave some helpful hints for the next year's publication.

Source: Leicester City Council

In conclusion

51. Local government achieved a notable success in the first year of local publication of the performance indicators. Our research has showed that the public strongly support this initiative. But future success depends on sustaining and developing the interest of the general public in this information. This can only be achieved through the continuing efforts of local authorities to build on the results already achieved.
Appendix

Local authorities participating in the detailed research

The Audit Commission wishes to thank the following authorities for their time in contributing to the research:

London Borough of Barnet
London Borough of Brent
Devon and Cornwall Police Authority
Gedling Borough Council
Mid-Glamorgan County Council
Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council
Somerset County Council
Wyre Borough Council
District Auditors were first appointed in the 1840s to inspect the accounts of authorities administering the Poor Law. Auditors ensured that safeguards were in place against fraud and corruption and that local rates were being used for the purposes intended. The founding principles remain as relevant today as they were 150 years ago. Public funds need to be used wisely, as well as in accordance with the law. The task of today's auditors is to assess expenditure, not just for probity and regularity, but for value for money as well.

The Audit Commission was established in 1983 to appoint and regulate the external auditors of local authorities in England and Wales. In 1990 its responsibilities were extended to include the National Health Service. For more information on the work of the Commission, please contact:

The Audit Commission
1 Vincent Square
London
SW1P 2PN
Tel: 0171 828 1212