



Service Quality

# LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PROGRAMME



Participation

# Research Summary

## Beacon Council Scheme: Year 2 Themes

### Introduction

Continuous improvements in the quality and effectiveness of local services are now a statutory responsibility for local authorities under the Best Value framework. The Beacon Council Scheme was set up in 1999 as an element within the wider, overarching Local Government Modernisation Agenda as a means of identifying centres of excellence, across specialised areas within local government.

The rationale of the Beacon Council Scheme is for local authorities to demonstrate and exchange learning and good practice to improve performance. As such, councils selected for Beacon status spread and share their practices through a series of roadshows, open days and other activities in Beacon authorities co-ordinated by the IDeA.

Beacon councils are identified as being 'good' in their general functioning as a local authority and 'excellent' in the particular service or cross-cutting area for which Beacon status is awarded. Ministers, on the advice of an Independent Advisory Panel, grant Beacon status for local authorities achieving excellence and maintaining consistently high standards, as well as by achieving rapid improvements in service delivery.

In the first year of the scheme, councils were appointed as beacons in seven themes, ranging from 'dealing with waste' to 'helping care leavers'. In the second year, the number of themes was increased to eleven:

- Competitiveness and Enterprise
- Local Health Strategies
- Accessible Services
- Foster Care
- Tackling Drug Misuse
- Town Centre Regeneration
- Raising Attainment in Education
- Regenerating through Culture, Sport and Tourism
- Independent Living for Older People
- Maintaining a Quality Environment
- Tackling Vehicle Crime

### The Research

Researchers were commissioned for each of the eleven themes to provide the Advisory Panel with a grounded and empirical view of the issues faced in relation to each of the service areas and evidence they should look for in identifying good practice. The researchers worked alongside the specialist panel member for each theme – producing a short report and bibliography – to inform the Panel of the types of problems faced by local authorities in effectively tackling the issues raised in each of the Beacon themes.



Finance



Management



Structure

Researchers were appointed to describe and evaluate key pieces of research and data and highlight examples of good practice in local authorities. As such, the reports aimed to:

- define the issue by outlining the nature, scale, history and the factors that contribute to it;
- identify what local authorities should be seeking to achieve, in terms of overall aims or objectives, in addressing the issue, including reference to key Government policy initiatives and targets relevant to the theme;
- outline factors involved in addressing the issue affecting the ability of local authorities to develop and/or implement an appropriate response;
- establish a descriptive baseline – where possible – of current practice based upon available quantitative and qualitative data, and;
- set out the essential characteristics of an approach that ought to constitute “Best Practice” based upon normative considerations as well as empirical observations.

Each of the reports is available on the DETR Local and Regional Government Research Unit website at <http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/research/index.htm> of which brief summaries are provided below.

## The Themes

**Competitiveness and Enterprise** – Better regulation of business to protect consumers and encourage enterprise

*University of Birmingham*

A report commissioned this year by the Office of Fair Trading estimated that consumer detriment costs the UK economy about £8.3 billion a year. The need therefore to protect consumers is clear although this obviously has to be balanced with the burden of regulation on business. A range of contingent factors can influence the effectiveness of an environment in which better regulation can protect consumers and encourage enterprise, relating to legislation, the activity regulated, the people regulated, the regulating agency, and the regulated business.

Best Value Reviews provide an important opportunity to challenge the obstacles to better regulation and to develop alternative approaches based on consultation with stakeholders, comparison with other enforcement agencies and a more competitive approach to management. Reviews of enforcement activities in Best Value authorities however, have identified shortfalls in leadership, management information, planning, and communication. Whilst there is considerable consistency between the sources of good practice advice, there remains inconsistency in the approaches of enforcement and business support services within and between Best Value authorities.

**Education** – Increasing the attainment of under-achieving groups

*University of Newcastle*

Under-achievement is an apparently straightforward, yet actually problematic concept, increasingly being seen as a systemic phenomenon, because of the relative ineffectiveness of the education system in enabling certain individuals and groups to make adequate progress.

Local authorities have a key role to play encouraging schools and teachers to focus more on the effectiveness of their practice (rather than simply external factors) and to operate in a way which is responsive to individual differences, focusing on the proactive development of resilience, rather than simply a reactive response to disadvantage.

Locating any specific strategies within the context of a broad school improvement programme will itself focus on developing the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Councils can develop services for ‘at risk’ groups and individuals, which work closely in support of mainstream schools and offer strategic leadership and management, based on a strategic ‘vision’. This will help to co-ordinate resources, services and agencies and enable councils to act as ‘brokers’ between schools, pupils, parents and communities. This will involve targeting resources in support of their strategy and crucially, involves local authorities in generating and managing high-quality data on the nature of under-achievement in their areas

**Health** – Effective local strategies to tackle the wider causes of ill health

*University of Birmingham*

Tackling health issues comprehensively means taking account of a wide range of factors – hereditary conditions; lifestyle; social influences; living and working conditions and general socio-economic circumstances – of which, less than 10% of the relevant determinants are found within the sphere of health care and the NHS.

In recognition of this, the policy and legislative framework for local authority involvement in health has changed considerably in recent years and councils now have a pivotal role in tackling the multiple, overlapping issues which impact upon health. Programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget, Sure Start and Health/Education Action Zones have taken on an increasingly holistic and strategic orientation, requiring local authorities to concentrate more on regenerating and engaging communities and strengthening partnerships and community involvement.

There are many examples of good and innovative practice being developed by local authorities across the country. Frequently however, these are one-off projects which disappear when the supportive funding runs out, or are the result of the work of particular officers or members and so do not necessarily continue when those individuals move on. These might be examples of good practice, but best practice requires something more, mainstreaming health considerations and adopting a strategic approach to improving the health of the population and particularly overcoming health inequalities.

**Making the most of Culture, Sport and Tourism** – Stimulating economic and social regeneration through culture, sport and tourism

*University of Birmingham*

The creative industries have an annual turnover of £60 billion a year. 1 in 6 of all new jobs created in the last 10 years have been in tourism. As such, these new ‘growth’ sectors offer major opportunities for regenerating and revitalising areas, as well as diversifying economic bases. As well as the economic benefits, culture, sport and tourism can also aid social renewal, helping to bridge the

entertainment and information gap, appealing directly to individuals’ interests and wants, establishing a community identity, encouraging collective effort and building positive links within the wider population.

Historically, there is a well established tradition of partnership working in the ‘mixed economy’ of culture and leisure where local provision has come from the public, private and voluntary sectors and there are numerous illustrations of recent and current examples of projects either directly or part funded by councils. However, innovation is a key ingredient in the process of working – through for example, new forms of consultation or unusual funding mechanisms such as sponsorship – or in the form of the regeneration projects. Plans and strategies need to be based on a sound understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities, with their impact tracked and evaluated from the start. They need to demonstrate an integrated and strategic approach to economic and social regeneration, whilst grasping the local agenda in the area, enhancing local distinctiveness and celebrating both cultural diversity and unity.

**Modern Service Delivery** – Good access to council services

*University of Birmingham*

The question of access goes well beyond issues of the physical access of public offices, or the processes of electronic government, into the ability of authorities to respond to differences between consumers in relation to their needs, characteristics, expectations and their relationship with the services. There have been some major improvements over the last fifteen years with the introduction of citizen-centred service delivery. However, these have rarely been integrated with the ‘back offices’, were often limited to one or two services and did not devolve decisions to the ‘front-line staff’. Similarly, there remain psychological barriers relating to public perceptions and expectations of services that councils provide.

Providing ‘good access’ is therefore not just about creating a solid infrastructure for good practice at the ‘front end’, simply matching existing services to people. Real needs have to be understood, discussed and wherever possible met, exploiting the full range of channels for access. Internal considerations are

equally important. Consistent and council-wide improvements in service access and quality, strategies for internal communication, external relations, public consultation and participation, and staff training and support are all essential if improved access is to produce real benefits for the public.

**Older People's Issues** – Supporting independent living for older people

*DETR*

Older people, like other groups within society, want to have active, independent and secure lives. They consequently, expect services that are co-ordinated and integrated to meet their needs – enabling them to live independently. Older people's services are not only about providing physical environments that enable independent living, but can also be defined in the context of preventative health and social care, reducing obstacles to well-being and alleviating the impacts of ageing.

There are two levels at which local authorities might tackle the issue of independent living. At the general level, the requirements of Best Value and the wider modernisation agenda will inevitably lead to developing service delivery strategies aimed specifically at older people and encouraging public participation and involvement. At the specific level, there is also a need to respond to various governmental initiatives such as the National Carer's Strategy, special grants for promoting independence through partnerships and the Better Government for Older People programme.

Whilst a number of authorities have written strategies relating to their ageing populations, few have yet been able to apply these to the specific needs of older people. By its generic nature, supporting independent living for older people requires a service-led perspective, cutting across departments and extending out to partnerships to ensure a comprehensive and inclusionary approach.

**Social Services** – Improving standards for children in foster care

*University of York*

Fostering is the most important option in the care system with around 55,000 children looked after by English local authorities. Most foster children have been, and can be expected to stay, in care for long

periods of time. There is also a considerable turnover of children and six out of every ten children leave the care system having had more than one placement.

A number of key issues are faced by local authorities in providing for children in foster care namely; a shortage of carers; the difficulty of the clientele; matching needs to available placements; the support and training of the carer, and; general 'environmental' difficulties. These are met in a context however where resources are short and demand for new initiatives many. Problems are expounded further in relation to particular issues relating to a lack of placement choice – particularly for teenagers and ethnic minorities – placement instability, low expectations and shortages of foster carers.

Addressing these issues successfully requires a strategy which considers the views of all the parties involved (birth parents, carers, children and social workers) and gives priority to the children's welfare, taking account of key needs of children and ensuring that they have as much certainty as possible about the future. Good practice therefore includes ensuring placement choice, paying close attention to children's emotional, behavioural and educational needs, an adequate system for recruiting and supporting foster carers, and policies and practice which provide continuity and support for children during and after they leave foster care.

**Sustainable Development/Local Environmental Quality**- Maintaining a high quality local environment

*AEA Technology plc*

Local authorities have a lot of influence over the quality of the local environment. This includes responsibilities; as an enabler, in partnership with other organisations; as a provider, through the management of activities such as street cleansing; and as a regulator, through its monitoring and enforcement role.

Because of the wide range of issues that have to be addressed and the influence of external factors, the maintenance of a high quality environment is, in practice, more achievable for some authorities than for others. However, there are a number of relatively consistent objectives that an authority can seek to achieve concerning approaches to sustainable

development within the Local Agenda 21 strategy; air quality; noise abatement; transport planning, and; waste management.

The principles of sustainable development should be integrated into the local authority structure and decision-making process. Education and awareness raising need to be high on an authority's agenda and all stakeholders should be involved in the development of strategies and their implementation. This may encompass neighbouring authorities and organisations with which an authority should develop partnerships to tackle, for example, cross boundary issues. An authority should set appropriate contract mechanisms and monitor performance, using its powers of regulation and enforcement to good effect. Most importantly any strategy should be translated into effective service delivery with real results and a satisfied public.

**Younger People's Issues** – Tackling drug misuse  
*University of Cardiff*

Research on the use of illicit drugs by young people revealed a dramatic rise across the UK during the 1990s. It is almost certainly the case within the UK that illicit drugs are now more widely available and more widely used than at any time in the recent past. Problem drug misuse however is a complex and multi-faceted problem. There is strong correlation with family break-up and initiation into criminal activity but it is also interconnected with other features of social exclusion such as homelessness, offending behaviour and lack of engagement in work, education or training.

Local authority responses will inevitably be influenced by these wider agendas and a number of organisational structures exist which can be used to tackle drug misuse in which councils have a key participative role to play. Many of these structures are new and require time and energy to create effective partnerships and to adapt current structures of service delivery, financial planning and decision-making. Moreover, the diversity of programmes and schemes already underway attempts to reflect the differing needs, problems and issues faced by specific communities. To effectively and successfully tackle issues surrounding drug misuse however, policies and initiatives have to be inclusionary and engage communities and young people themselves. Equally, to be meaningful, ensuring the inclusion of all

parties concerned, initiatives have to be flexible, interactive with accessible strategic approaches, combining the elements of prevention, intervention, treatment and harm reduction whilst targeting general and specific groups, users and the community.

**Community Safety** – Reducing and preventing vehicle crime  
*Crime Concern*

Recorded crime statistics show a fall in vehicle crime since 1992. However, the 1996 International Crime Victimization Survey found car owners in England and Wales to be at the greatest risk of theft of all the countries surveyed, highlighting that it remains a significant problem in the UK. There is no one single cause – and hence solution – and so it is important to develop an integrated approach, combining long and short term measures and cutting across a range of fronts. For example, protecting more vulnerable older vehicles; reaching less security conscious owners; enhancing car park security; targeted enforcement; reducing the risks of young people getting involved in vehicle crime; weakening the market in stolen goods; providing crime prevention advice and information on vulnerable groups, and; reducing repeat victimisation.

The ability of local partnerships to prevent and reduce vehicle crime will depend to some extent on how far they adopt a problem-solving approach; their success in accessing resources, including from mainstream budgets, and; on effective links with a range of partnerships, such as the Drug Action Team and the local Youth Offending Team, to develop early and appropriate interventions with young people at greatest risk of criminal involvement.

A review of local crime reduction strategies suggests that there is some way to go to maximise local vehicle crime reduction. Integrated packages of measures that respond to local problems are still relatively rare and the contribution that a range of council services can make has not yet been fully harnessed. However, there are promising examples of good practice on which to build.

## **Planning** – Town centre regeneration

### *URBED*

There are reckoned to be at least 1000 town centres in England and they are important, not only as centres of retailing, but also as transport hubs and as distinctive parts of our cultural heritage and built environment. Declining levels of activity in many towns and concerns about their sustainability have led to changes in planning policy aimed at making the most of existing centres. Policy now stresses and encourages development within walking distance of existing centres and whilst it is too early to judge the impact, there has definitely been some switch towards retail development in-town, and some increase in both leisure and housing investment in urban areas.

The stress on ‘positive planning’ has prompted councils and other stakeholders to respond in a variety of ways but all should result in a change in attitudes towards the town. Successful planning should incorporate diversifying of attractions, improving accessibility, and raising the levels of amenity. While some centres are still suffering from excessive vacancy, others have found ways of improving their shopping facilities, diversifying their attractions, coping with the car, creating a pride of place, and resourcing local initiatives. Successful local authorities work with a range of partners to improve the quality, and not just the quantity, of what the town offers, and making the most of their distinct strengths and opportunities. Some are planning for a network of smaller centres, and a few will be contributing to policies for sustainable development, urban renaissance, and regional development.

Making the most of a town’s assets involves proactive planning and management. There are now inspiring examples, often from the larger cities and historic towns, of how places can be ‘turned around’ and these in turn are encouraging the smaller towns to raise their standards. There are many forms of Town Centre Management and town centre partnerships from which lessons can be drawn on how to get the different stakeholders to work together.

## Conclusions

Councils are changing and adapting in response to the increasingly complex and multifaceted issues that they face. In basing policies and decisions upon these pressures and in responding to the Local Government Modernisation Agenda, so new and more effective approaches are being sought to tackle them. The Beacon Council Scheme provides an opportunity to draw together different, successful approaches – across a variety of themes – for authorities to demonstrate and learn from one another how they have tackled and overcome particular problems.

In this respect, the research papers present an assessment of the issues faced in each service area and provides a synopsis of what should, could, or is being done in response to them. In drawing up and implementing a successful initiative to deal with any of the issues, a number of main factors emerge as common considerations running consistently throughout the themes.

Firstly, **inclusivity**. It is nothing new to say that involving people in a meaningful way in deliberations and the decision-making process and giving them a stake in the outcome will help ensure consent and support for any agreed strategy. However, encouraging participation also raises the profile of authorities, making them more visible and accessible to the wider public whilst helping people identify with their community and aware of the issues it faces. This would in turn facilitate new and previously unconsidered ways of addressing the issues at hand. Rather than simply tackling the symptoms, more and more policies are becoming increasingly preventative and pre-emptive and as such, demand the acceptance and co-operation of the community concerned.

As policies and initiatives become ever more complicated, so the interrelationships between them become more sophisticated. It is important therefore that a **strategic, wide-angle perspective** of the various issues is adopted to ensure that the linkages are maintained and that issues are not sidelined or relegated. As examples throughout the research

papers suggest, an overarching viewpoint will help integrate different service areas and ensure that direct and indirect pressures both on and from policies and initiatives are sustained and that a coherent and consistent response is provided.

Linked to both inclusivity and a strategic viewpoint is the importance of establishing **partnerships** to address the issues at hand. People working closely within authorities, between authorities and with external organisations and related parties not only help alleviate the problem of limited resources and duplication, but improves general understanding of issues and solutions faced and may even present new, yet unconsidered initiatives. As such, the availability of **clear, sound and relevant information** at an early stage is an evident priority, not only to inform the development of the response to the issue being addressed, but also to ensure that there is a **mutual understanding** amongst all interested parties.

None of these factors however are particularly meaningful in isolation. Each **cuts across a number of important initiatives** – i.e. Service First standards, Modernising Government themes, Health Action Zones, Single Regeneration Budget and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Efforts at customising policies and initiatives to reflect both local and national objectives, blending them into a coherent, overarching strategy and aiming them at more citizen-centred service delivery are still very nascent, involving a high degree of uncertainty and complexity. Developing approaches to take account all of these issues requires local authorities to be continuously challenging – developing themselves, their strategies and their services in inventive and original ways. By the very nature of their newness therefore, the Beacon Scheme – and these research papers – provides a means by which these experiences can be shared and understood.

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