



MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE BEACON COUNCIL SCHEME

**DETERMINING WHETHER THE BEST LOCAL AUTHORITIES APPLY
TO BECOME BEACON COUNCILS**

Report to the IDeA and ODPM

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Monitoring and Evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme

Determining whether the best local authorities apply to become Beacon Councils

Introduction

The research reported here forms part of a wider monitoring and evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme, undertaken by the Local Government Centre at Warwick Business School and commissioned by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), now Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

The Beacon Council Scheme was given prominence in the Government's White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (DETR, 1998b). This acknowledged that there were pre-existing examples of councils that had already developed new and imaginative approaches to service delivery, community engagement and local political leadership. Specifying a clear definition of the 'modern council,' the Government established the Beacon Council Scheme to help to raise standards across all local authorities by awarding recognition of Beacon status to those councils judged to be models of excellence and able to demonstrate their exemplary practice. As a means to encourage innovation and change within aspiring and even unsuccessful councils, the scheme also intends that all English local authorities are included through a national programme to share information, and spread good practice.

The programme of monitoring and evaluation has been reported in a series of papers by the Warwick research team (see Appendix 1). Earlier research has evaluated the extent to which the scheme is perceived to be successful and useful to local authorities, the extent of learning and service improvement through the scheme, and barriers and enablers of learning and change.

Research objectives

With the number of applications falling in Year 3 of the scheme, there is some concern whether the best local authorities are applying in each theme area. The evaluators were asked to consider three research questions. The first aim was to identify trends in applications over the three rounds of the scheme. The report *Identifying trends in applications and in selection* (Downe, J. and Hartley, J.) was submitted to the DTLR and IDeA in April 2002. The second objective aimed to determine why local authorities do or do not apply and understanding the reasons why applications are falling. The report *Why local authorities do or do not apply to become Beacon Councils* (Downe, J. Rashman, L. and Hartley, J.), addressed a number of factors which influenced the fall in applications and was submitted in April 2002.

The aim of the third phase of the research is to address concerns regarding whether the best local authorities are applying to the scheme in specific theme areas. We approached this by considering two representations of the concept of 'best'. The first is the perception of best by informed commentators who may be influential in shaping opinion about good practice in local government. This qualitative framework might be called the reputational effect. We have also undertaken separate analyses of 'best'

utilising data envelopment analysis (DEA) to analyse quantitative measures of organizational performance. This research project will assess both types of best, and also examine how they are related.

Methodology

There are now a substantial number of Beacon themes across the three rounds of the scheme, and also a wide range of performance indicators. We therefore decided to choose four themes using the following matrix based on the *number* and *scope* of indicators related to the theme.

Table 2: Matrix to select Beacon themes

	Small number of performance indicators	Large number of performance indicators
Clear and direct performance indicators	Service theme A	Service theme B
Proxy or indirect indicators	Service theme C	Service theme D

Models have been developed for assessing best practice in relation to the four round 2 Beacon Council themes (see Appendix 2 for details). These four services were selected at a workshop for DTLR and IDeA staff held on February 27 2002.

A= Accessible Services

B= Foster Care

C= Regeneration through Culture, Tourism and Sport

D= Independent Living for Older People

For the ‘reputational’ analysis, the sample is concerned with the identifying expertise, not the number of respondents (there are too few experts to have a large sample). A total of 14 in-depth telephone interviews were therefore conducted with expert representatives of central, regional and local government, national agencies, non-government organisations and professional bodies related to the chosen theme over a period of three weeks in May 2002. The sample was selected to include informed representatives who were able to comment on one of four round 2 Beacon themes, in addition to commenting on overall local authority performance. In nearly all cases, interviewees had considerable contact with local authorities and local authority networks. They were directly involved in developing best practice, formal or informal assessment of performance and had substantial specialist expertise and knowledge.

In most of the themes, there were a small number of national organizations, which were able to comment on the scheme and give perceptions of top performing local authorities. Table 1 provides a sketch on the respondents involved in the telephone interviews. Confidentiality has been assured by not naming specific organizations, but it does provide some context for their views on reputation. In a few cases, individuals

were able to comment from a number of different perspectives, such as president of a professional association and chief officer in a local authority.

Table 1: Respondents in the 'reputational' telephone interviews

Theme	Number of expert interviewees	Types of organization	Roles
General performance	3	National body; professional association	Strategic management Executive role
Regeneration through Culture, Sport and Tourism	3	Urban regeneration scheme University	Executive role Academics
Independent Living for Older People	3	National initiative; professional association; NGO; government department	Executive role Policy role Senior management
Accessible services	3	Government-related agency; professional association; local authority	Executive role Senior management
Raising attainment in education	2	Professional association; local authority	Executive role Senior management

The relatively small sample size is a reflection of the limited number of individuals in each theme area who had the expertise to participate in the research. We contacted more than 30 individuals but a number refused to take part because they felt unable to comment on performance on a national basis and/or felt that they did not have any knowledge on the Beacon Council Scheme. The findings of this part of the research are indicative but are helpful in supporting the quantitative analysis. In each theme, we have examined the performance of authorities named by respondents as being excellent and compared these results with the Beacon Councils.

We used an interview schedule that included questions on perceptions of the best local authorities in relation to the Beacon Council Scheme. These included features of top performing authorities, characteristics of leading edge authorities in four specific round 2 Beacon themes, the attractions of the scheme to top performing authorities, reasons why the best authorities might not apply to the scheme or might not be selected (see Appendix 3).

Top performing local authorities, good practice and innovation

Interviewees reported a great deal of innovation in local authorities, although this was seen to be highly variable between authorities. Several considered the amount of work and commitment to improving on previous best to be impressive, given the pressures and resource constraints in local government generally. Experimentation included small-scale projects, as well as wholesale reorientation. Some thought that the emphasis tended to be on improving efficiency rather than effectiveness and that a small proportion of councils were ‘floundering.’ One interviewee thought that councils were *‘polarising – those that are aware of the agenda are developing phenomenally fast’* whilst others were *‘not yet really engaged with it.’*

One respondent, with a formal responsibility for inspection of local authorities, suggested that the Best Value regime had started to have an impact and there was evidence of improved performance at the corporate centre as well as in service areas. He also believed that the introduction of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was also making authorities examine and improve their internal processes and procedures. Another interviewee argued that there was not much evidence of innovation but this was not the fault of local authorities. Councils are simply implementing central government’s plans, there is too much prescription and less room for local change.

Features of top performing authorities

Respondents were asked for the distinguishing features of the top performing authorities. Respondents held a fairly consistent view that the distinguishing features of top performing authorities included visionary leadership (both political and managerial), strong corporate management, clear priorities and objectives, organizational capacity, willingness to engage in dialogue with the community and service recipients and commitment to partnership working. A number of different criteria were given including,

- Efficiency in delivering services to people (basic infrastructure)
- Holistic approach to service delivery
- Good systems and processes
- Innovative
- Sufficient corporate capability
- Strategic thinking
- Emphasis on results and the measurement of results
- Good relationship with external organisations
- Investment in people development (e.g. good training systems)
- A good place to work
- A political consensus around the future
- Good communication systems

There were different perceptions of how top performing authorities demonstrated their innovation and success. One respondent reported a ‘twin track approach’, one of which is *‘sound and solid’*, the other involving *‘a lot of innovatory things’*. Another respondent suggested that top authorities were sometimes involved in deepening

change in ways that were not always immediately perceptible. *'It's easy to put forward a good case by having a lot of nice window dressing but quality local authorities are doing the real work that's boring, less glamorous, such as putting in a robust internal infrastructure'*.

Political and managerial leadership was mentioned as being significant by many interviewees. A top performing authority will include elected members who are change-minded and high quality staff who are motivated to change. Some felt that the political environment was an important influence and that success and change were dependent upon the calibre of individual leaders and the balance between political stability and a degree of challenge. Other features included a 'thirst for change' and the capability to free up and move resources internally. Some interviewees thought it was important to distinguish between what the government and external evaluators might perceive to be a successful authority and what the recipients of the service might value.

One interviewee commented that the combination of an effective leader and chief executive can be highly influential in creating change and improvement in a relatively short period of time, particularly where there is a favourable policy and financial environment.

Position of top performing authorities

Most respondents were able to name a number of councils that they perceived to be amongst the current top performing authorities. Irrespective of the specialist theme, some councils were named by several interviewees. Those most frequently named tended to be London and metropolitan boroughs and unitary councils. There was a fair degree of consistency in the councils named as 'best' within specific themes. Some interviewees declined to name authorities, other than within the specific service theme in which they felt they had authority to make a judgement or suggested that it was difficult to be definitive. One interviewee argued, *'They are very distinctive at local level. It's too broad to be able to say they have got it cracked across the piece'*.

Interviewees suggested that they had a fair idea of where authorities were placed within broad bandings (e.g. top, middle, and bottom). Warwickshire was mentioned as being one of the best county councils, Kirklees was viewed positively as being strategically minded, and (a northern metropolitan borough) was *'getting better'* – *a lucky authority that has learnt from its success'*. Another respondent mentioned Kent, Camden and Surrey as being his impression of the top performers.

One respondent put forward two authorities in the north of England as being examples of top performers, but did not wish for these authorities to be named in this report. He suggested that one of the councils *'may not be as good as they think they are'*. Other authorities, such as Sunderland, Middlesborough and Newcastle were suggested as going in the right direction but not placed at the top. Some authorities had made significant improvements (e.g. Liverpool), but this change was from a much lower base than other authorities, so it doesn't make it a top performer. However, one interviewee disagreed and named Liverpool as a top performer.

There was some disagreement over whether the positions of the top performers were fairly stable or changing. One respondent used the analogy of the Premier League in football, where there are a few teams that will always be in the top half-dozen (e.g. Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool) for the next five to ten years. However, there can be some movement within the top band gradually over time. Another respondent was convinced that the position of the top performers does change more rapidly. There are also different time frames to build to being best (e.g. regeneration versus accessible services). A change of leader and chief executive is a factor that can greatly influence the positions of councils.

Most thought that the position of top performing authorities changed over time and continued to change over a three to five year period. One interviewee commented, *'They are changing. Some I would have regarded as leaders even three years ago are being passed and having to work harder to become leading authorities'*. A few people thought that the position was relatively stable, changing over a longer time period. One said *'There is a stable core with turnover at the margins, an eight to ten year cycle'*. In contrast, another respondent thought that it was not always easy to make a generalised assessment: *'I'm not sure it's possible to answer that question. I'm very sceptical about authorities that are considered as being top performers. I am very aware of those who have a reputation as high quality, top performing but whose services are lousy, good at managing their image'*.

One respondent took the middle ground, as he believed that movement into the top echelon is possible, but he was not sure about the reverse. Camden and Newham were cited as authorities that have made huge leaps in performance over the last five years.

It was observed that the summative categorisation of authorities causes problems, as there is often good and poor performance in different service areas within every authority.

One interviewee argued that the top (as well as the worst) performing authorities were large single-tier councils. She suggested that the performance of district councils can be good but they do not fall into the excellent category. It was suggested that although the Audit Commission normally take the view that larger authorities perform better than smaller authorities, there is good performance in each type of authority regardless of size.

The reputation of authorities is influenced by many factors. One way of improving reputation is by 'hitting the press' - national and trade press (e.g. Local Government Chronicle and Municipal Journal) in a positive way. Some local authorities have a PR game plan so observers should be wary of spin. A key leadership figure, usually the chief executive but also the leader or the two together, can make a significant impression on the reputation of an authority if they are happy to operate on the national level. Attendance at national networks can also influence the assessment of being a top performer.

The ‘reputation’ of authorities and the impact of ‘spin’

Most respondents thought that there were councils that were better at ‘spin than substance’ though there were also some mixed views about this. Some thought that publicity and hype were necessary and helped to build a positive image of success, provided there was genuine improvement to back up the claims and to balance public profile with service delivery. One said, *‘Hats off to them. There is a role – you have to market it [service innovation] to get it to work and get politicians on board but if there’s no substance it will be found out’.*

Another respondent questioned the concept of best and whose perceptions of best were influential. In his view, public image could be a motivating factor for the staff within a service but there were risks if service recipients were led to believe that the service had been judged to be the ‘best’ and this was not their own experience. He argued that learning from the best was not the only approach and that learning from mistakes was equally important.

The whole of local government can be open to the accusation of being very good at ‘spin’ with little evidence of innovation and/or improvement ‘on the ground’, but it is the larger authorities (e.g. the metropolitan boroughs) that are seen to have the sophisticated PR departments. For example, one of the core cities mentioned as being a good performer in the regeneration theme (northern metropolitan borough) was regarded as being largely PR with little evidence of improvement, long before they achieved success.

Characteristics of leading edge authorities by Beacon theme

We asked interviewees about their views of the characteristics of leading edge authorities, related to one of the four round 2 Beacon themes (or about general performance in a few cases). Most respondents described similar characteristics for leading edge services as they did for top performing authorities across the board. There were many common features of all leading edge authorities, irrespective of the specialist theme or expertise.

Features of successful organizations included:

- long-term strategic vision
- customer focus and consultation
- leadership
- partnership
- cross-service working
- openness to listening to customers, rather than ‘taking the provider view’
- openness to change
- capacity to free up resources
- capacity for implementation at middle manager level.

Some respondents were willing to name those authorities which they perceived to be leading edge authorities and which are Beacons in a specific theme. Those who did not feel able to identify top performers in general were also less likely to name authorities within the theme. Those who had identified top performing authorities,

tended to identify a small number (typically one or two) of leading edge authorities within the theme, often drawn from the wider group that they had previously mentioned. These were mostly unitary and metropolitan authorities but some county and district councils were identified.

Some felt that it was harder for smaller authorities to be perceived as among the best. It was suggested that this might be related to the need for major capital investment to achieve significant profile. For example, one interviewee in the regeneration theme named a number of major development projects in northern cities and commented that the unitary and larger city councils had access to external funding streams, whilst smaller authorities do not. Other advantages for larger councils were being able to control the full range of services and release internal resources for improvement work. Some respondents suggested that there were advantages of being a small authority and deliberately mentioned county councils and district councils as examples of leading edge authorities, as they saw smaller authorities *'doing equally innovative things'* and felt there was a danger of distortion.

In a few cases, individuals were identified within authorities, as being the leaders or drivers of improvement closely associated with top performance.

One interviewee commented that the method for assessing corporate performance in the Beacon Council Scheme had not been 'entirely satisfactory' and compared the 'bundle of PIs approach' that had been developed within the scheme to the more comprehensive approach of Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA). The outcome of the current CPA process might provide information about the limitations of those authorities judged to be the best based on the scheme criteria, and this would be a valuable area to explore in future research.

Adopting and adapting practice from top performing authorities was perceived to be increasingly sophisticated. It was not sufficient to merely attempt to emulate leading edge authorities but to understand in depth the contributory factors to sustained success. *'If I wanted to import good practice, I'd talk about what [councils] did. If I hype up a high performer, people tend to look for 'What's the reality?' It's changed over the last five years. The concept of good performance is taken more seriously'*.

Regeneration through Culture, Sport and Tourism

It takes time to build reputation in the regeneration area, as there is no 'quick fix' solution. There are not many 'new kids on the block' as working with partners, building trust and achieving success on the ground usually takes years. The better performers are those places that have performed well for years. *'Culture and strategic vision don't develop overnight. It takes sustained vision and long-term commitment'*.

A number of criteria were put forward as being features of a top performing authority in the area of regeneration. Good working relationships with important stakeholders were seen as being key to high performance. Effective relationships are needed between many organizations including local authorities, community partners, workers in the private sector and developers. The partnerships that are long-standing and where there is not too much time spent arguing are said to be the successful ones. Political stability was also thought to be a contributory factor.

A local authority that is effective in regeneration needs to think and act strategically. A good overall plan should be in place and agreed with partners. There needs to be an integrated view of service delivery (not regeneration around the edges but involving education and social services). Another important feature of a good performer is whether the evaluation indicates that the public are happy with the changes.

Respondents suggested a short-list of local authorities that they believed were the top performing authorities. 'Core cities' such as Newcastle, Leeds and Manchester were suggested as having a long-term track record of success in regeneration. Nottingham and Sandwell were also put forward as impressive examples of authorities that have achieved success on the ground. It was argued that regeneration is about 'urban' areas as this is where the problems lie and rural areas in England are harder to find, but there may be good schemes in smaller authorities. A couple of counties were highlighted as being examples of good practice (Cumbria and Northumberland).

One interviewee was surprised by the selection of one authority as a Beacon Council. He questioned the amount of evidence the authority had of good performance. Another respondent suggested that this council has enormous difficulties, is making lots of progress, but is not the leader in the field. Two London boroughs were short-listed for the Beacon award (Newham and Southwark), but this was viewed with surprise by some as it was argued that London boroughs have a poor reputation for regeneration – 'the process is not very good'. Other interviewees did suggest however, that Newham and Camden had a lot of good ideas. Gateshead has a very good reputation in the field and has gained confidence from what Newcastle has achieved, so there was little surprise at the selection of this Beacon Council. Nottingham was regarded as being a well-run authority that is quite innovative and fairly successful.

In the regeneration theme, the British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) awards were regarded as the most prestigious awards in the area. These awards are given to organizations across Great Britain, not just in England as they are in the Beacon Council Scheme.

One respondent suggested that he would expect some discontinuity on the lists between Beacon Councils and BURA winners because of differing application processes and selection criteria. Another interviewee did not consider this award to match sufficiently well with the Beacon theme to be seen as an alternative. There was agreement that all award schemes should look below the surface to find evidence of regeneration and it was implied that this was done more strenuously with the BURA award than the Beacon Council Scheme. A respondent gave the example of the award given to Canary Wharf by the Royal Institute for British Architects, a week before it went bankrupt.

Around 80 applications are made for the BURA scheme in each year, of which approximately five awards are presented. There are four general requirement measures and a number of specific criteria. The winners must demonstrate 'best' practice (not good or average), must involve a range of partners, place emphasis on long-term development and management of the project and display qualities of imagination, innovation, inspiration and determination. Other criteria include whether

the project has made an economic contribution, is sustainable (over time and environmentally), whether it contributes to building the capacity for local people (community spirit) and there needs to be a track record of success. There is a stringent selection process that includes a visit to the project by a panel member and a written report. Interviews are conducted with sponsors and a different panel member makes a further visit.

Organizations apply for the BURA award for a number of reasons that include reputation, the fact that it attracts partners and helps to build careers for officers. The BURA awards are ten years old and have had time to build experience and reputation in contrast to the much newer Beacon Council Scheme. The winners are organizations that are usually involved in some sort of partnership. Local authorities are usually a player in each partnership and sometimes they are awarded individually (e.g. the local authorities of Caerphilly and Dundee in the most recent awards). As the awards are a decade old, the winners in 1992, which were ground-breaking then, can be regarded as being normal practice now. This shows the importance of disseminating good practice widely. All award winners are currently being re-visited to identify whether there is any cause and effect relationship with other best practice in the country.

The results of the DEA are the most problematic of the four analyses, but perhaps the most suspect due to the absence of agreed appropriate output measures of regeneration. The analytical models tie - rather tenuously, at best - consumer satisfaction with culture, sport and tourism facilities to per capita spending on those activities. The average performance scores of the applicant pool, therefore, tend to be slightly above or below those of the overall group of authorities. The strongest conclusion one can draw is that the applicant pool does not appear to be significantly different from the overall group. It may be difficult to demonstrate which authorities are best using this quantitative approach.

Independent Living for Older People

The first challenge with this service theme is that it has no clear definition or performance indicators. Research from KPMG has found that no Best Value reviews have taken place on Independent Living and Older People. However, this theme area is becoming a national government priority.

The top performers in this theme share a number of similar characteristics. These include having a good working relationship with health, a good corporate centre bringing organisations together, the commitment of members to direct resources to deliver outcomes, performance information systems to support joint working and committed staff. A holistic approach to Independent Living was put forward as the most salient factor. Some interviewees believed that there is now more evidence of health and social services working together to make improvements, *'Not in the health or social services 'box' but cross-functional and cross agency.'* Others thought that local authorities still had a long way to go to break out of traditional departmental boundaries.

Good overall planning and the flexibility on the ground to deliver services that meet the needs and interests of the recipients were thought to be critical factors. A top authority

in this theme, *'Listens to the nature of what service recipients want and is prepared to be flexible in delivering that, not hide bound by boundaries.'* Creativity was thought to be important in developing effective methods of dialogue with sections of the community and the skills and resources to facilitate people to raise issues and have them seriously addressed.

It is easier for larger authorities to have the capacity to deal with such issues, so it is not surprising to find that districts have a limited role compared to others. Smaller unitaries may be best placed to engage in dialogue and to develop long-term cross agency relationships. The problem for smaller councils is having the resources to meet specific specialist needs. How counties and districts work together is vital for success in this area. Respondents suggested that Somerset and Suffolk were good examples of where this was happening well on the ground but there was significant room for improvement. It was suggested that the government should try to encourage more joint applications for the Beacon award. Some interviewees were reluctant to identify specific authorities as top performing, expressing scepticism about perceptions of reputation. *'Some local authorities are good at managing their image, for example [two councils] are always in Community Care but a lot of their work is not very good on the ground'*. However, another interviewee was happy to name Camden, Spelthorne and Oxfordshire as examples of authorities that have good practice in this theme.

There were some strong opinions about the models underlying the Beacon scheme as regards the assessment and selection process and the approach to learning in this theme. One interviewee was concerned that a number of elements of the selection process were not in place at the outset. This included the background research and clear criteria, such as the relative weighting given to specific criteria to ensure that consultation and dialogue with older people was sufficiently emphasised. *'There was too little clarity in the definition of independence. Who defines it – the government or the service recipients?'* Another respondent did not consider that all of the members of the selection panel were sufficiently knowledgeable about the theme to evaluate the applicants. There was a perception that a number of very good, innovative authorities did not apply.

Respondents perceived the model of learning underlying the scheme to be flawed, particularly in the light of the concurrent Better Government for Older People (BGOP) project. Interviewees criticised the competitive element of the scheme and the identification of a small number as the 'best.' The value of learning networks was sharing information, talking and learning on an informal, frequent, regular basis. *'In BGOP there was a continuing network and continuous opportunity to learn together at regional and national level, not competing but valued for what each had to offer'*. The Beacon scheme in contrast, was seen to promote individual authorities, with the risk of 'Emperor's new clothes'.

The results of the DEA indicate that the 'best' are indeed among those applying to the Beacons programme. Of the fifteen in the applicant pool that were quantitatively assessable, the majority (11) were at or above 70% efficient, with six above 80%. Three and four authorities were on the best practice frontier (*i.e.*, perfectly efficient at 100%) in reference to models 2 and 1, respectively.

In determining the representativeness of the applicant pool, we examined the sample averages with regard to model 2 (since this analysis was based on the largest number of local authorities, 144). The mean performance score of the applicant pool (78.8%) was within a standard deviation of the overall mean (81.3%), which is not statistically significant. We can be confident that the application pool is similar to the overall set of local authorities. This means that applications do not stand out in any way, though the 'best' do get through the application process.

Accessible services

Not surprisingly, interviewees perceived accessible services and its core technological emphasis to be a rapidly evolving theme. They were more likely than interviewees in the other themes to describe the position of top performing authorities to be changing on a shorter cycle, typically two to three years. It was suggested that the leaders in this field are developing very rapidly. This view is supported by a recent survey of local authority websites and progress towards the national targets.

Top performing authorities in this theme particularly needed to be able to manage capacity. Freeing up people to engage with the strategic agenda, competent middle managers to implement projects and 'make things happen', experimentation, openness to new ways of working and thinking, a 'thirst for change' and developing holistic cultural change were key aspects of organizational capacity. One respondent argued that capacity did not necessarily imply increased or even sufficient resources. *'You'll never be in a situation where there are enough resources. Internally it means managing effectively'*.

Political leadership, vision and champions were critical to making the business case, recognising the relevance and importance of the technological dimension and in gaining the support of elected members. *'If you don't have the politicians on board you might as well go home. You need a visionary set of members to do it. E-government doesn't get many votes'*.

Respondents perceived a vast amount of innovation, hard work and commitment in this theme area. Ability to engage with the local community, to understand specific needs, to develop small-scale projects and to generate perceptions of 'real change' were other features. One interviewee described a small project, which involved putting internet access into sheltered accommodation, an experiment in a sector not usually recognised as a site for electronic access. He also described a visit to Liverpool, which although not considered to be 'top performing' had shifted perceptions inside and outside the organization. *'The buildings had improved, they look and feel different. It's not just a small number of people spreading the word but embedded in the culture. Staff think it's their idea and they are part of it'*.

Some respondents thought that high performing authorities generally were likely to also be high performing on the e-government agenda, although they were not always top of the PI listing. Top authorities in this theme included Camden, Sunderland, Tameside, Bromley, Salford and Hertfordshire. Others that were mentioned as being innovators were Newcastle, Ipswich, Carrick and Liverpool. There were also a number of authorities that were perceived to be effective in specialist areas, such as Hillingdon, Brent, West Sussex and Taunton Deane.

Given the rapidly changing pace of technological development, there were perceptions that the leaders were changing. Kent, Hampshire and Knowsley were examples of authorities that would have been seen to be at the forefront three years ago but had 'slipped slightly' whilst Lewisham was 'turning the corner.' Although many of the best authorities were London boroughs, unitary and single tier councils, smaller councils, such as Carrick, may have some advantage in it 'being easier to make things happen.'

All of the Beacons in this theme were identified as being amongst the leading edge authorities, suggesting a good match of perception with the award. However, interviewees thought that there were a number of good authorities that did not apply. The main reason for this was the amount of work and effort required for the application process. Respondents did not see alternative awards as particularly attractive unless accompanied by substantial finance. Chartermark, the Local Government Chronicle and Public Finance awards were mentioned but one interviewee said, *'There are millions of them. I have a jaundiced view of awards'*. Another commented that the Pathfinder for e-government had far more influence and offered access to a significant amount of funding - £25 million. All the local authorities referred to by this interviewee as top performers were pathfinders. He argued, *'Under the CPA, if a local authority is identified as high performing, it will get greater freedoms and flexibilities, if you get identified as a Pathfinder, there is more money, what do you get from the Beacon scheme? The number of people to take forward initiatives is in short supply, you go for the biggest payback'*.

The DEA frontier models for accessible services had a limited number of appropriate performance indicators - yet, they do confirm the premise that the 'best' authorities are applying. Indeed, even with the limited scope of the primary measure of accessibility, the models produced relatively high scores for the Beacon programme participants. In fact, with regard to each of the three models developed, the average performance score for the applicant pool was *greater* than that of the overall group of authorities. The models appear to indicate that the 'best' are among those applying.

Raising attainment in education

The local education authority's overall improvement strategy is central to this theme. A number of criteria were put forward as being features of a top performing authority. These include effective leadership at the centre of the organization as well as in the education department, organizational capacity, partnership with other agencies, particularly schools, good data and mechanisms to identify under-achievement and policies and strategies to raise standards. Key players with national profile were also thought to be an important aspect of the local authority's capacity and demonstration of its value and respect for education.

Other factors specific to the theme were schools that are effective at self evaluation, leading edge strategies for struggling schools, evidence that schools were improving, cross service working and funding strategies for cross-service working.

Inspection reports of local education authorities are available and tend to be widely read by those in inspection and school improvement. There are numerous local,

regional and national professional networks, which provide support, learning, peer mentoring and information sharing about performance. Respondents perceived there to be many improvements in this field and authorities striving to improve on their previous best. Inner cities tended to deliver substantial innovation as they benefit from additional funding sources, such as Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, urban regeneration and other cross-sector projects. Smaller unitary authorities were also perceived to be innovative although not always highlighted since these may be smaller scale, 'light touch' projects. *'There's a tremendous effort put into doing new things when capacity is dwindling on a daily basis'*.

Respondents were reluctant to identify top performers in this theme, suggesting that local circumstances were distinctive and that this was a changing field. One interviewee suggested that this was a very broad area of service and that rather than pick out an authority that was top performing in general, it was more useful to be able to identify more specific aspects of a service. *'Who to go to for different things. They are not necessarily good across the board. It's who you know in local authorities, the networks'*.

One of the key issues raised with regard to the Beacon award was the disparity in resources between authorities. For example, one of the Beacon Councils had a ratio of one inspector to four schools, compared to another applicant with a ratio of one to thirty. This would have a huge impact on the capacity and capability of the LEA to work with a school on an improvement strategy.

Although there is a separate Beacon Schools Scheme (though operated differently), there is no comparable award for raising attainment. Interviewees thought that the Beacon Council Scheme had more to offer to the council than to the education department specifically. It was also thought that there was inconsistency between the regulatory approach, which places emphasis on a 'light touch' and the definition of the theme.

One respondent commented in detail about some of the authorities that were awarded beacon status, all of which were known to her. In her view there was a political element to the choice of councils that were to be promoted. *'[Council A] is not an authority you hear much about. [Council B] has a supportive political nature and this helps in getting gongs. [Council C] - I was definitely not impressed. The cynical message is that 'we're going to promote this council' and [Council C] have since admitted that other councils' work was better'*.

Reputational versus rational definitions of 'good practice'

In assessing the 'best practice' of local authorities that are applying to the Beacon Council Scheme, we have produced a number of analyses estimating the *best practice frontier* (populated by the 'best' performing authorities), as well as the *performance gaps* of those authorities operating *below* that frontier based on publicly available performance indicators. Using Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA), we have characterised these assessments as part of a *rational* (as opposed to *reputational*) approach to defining best practice (See Appendix 1 for details on these four reports, Storbeck, 2002).

As explained above, we have also interviewed recognised experts in four Beacon theme areas, asking them to assess the ‘best’ performing authorities. In so doing, we have characterised these assessments as part of a *reputational* approach to defining best practice. Each method provides different perspectives on the question of best. The perceptions of informed commentators, who had an overview of the national scene, are important and show some degree of consensus. However, their judgements also show up that there are differences between observers as to what is seen as best (as well as average and poor). In particular, the reputational approach is sensitive to particular circumstances, e.g. particular innovations, achievements in the face of particular challenges, the relative achievements of small compared with larger councils etc.

The reputational approach is also sensitive to and may even inflate categorical errors. A categorical error occurs when a judge deems that a high performing authority is low performing or vice versa. A single local authority that is deemed to be a categorical error (by the commentator, by central government or by itself) is likely to have a disproportionate impact on the perceived robustness of the scheme, because the focus is on whether the *individual* authority has been appropriately categorised. By contrast, the rational approach is less sensitive because one categorical error will only change the mean slightly.

Therefore it is important that the Beacon application process is seen to be fair and valid, because reputational categorical errors are likely to have a large and possibly disproportionate impact on whether the Scheme is seen to be accurate.

We have compared the data obtained by the reputational approach (councils named by the experts as being high performers) with the data analysed through DEA based on performance indicators. Clearly, we do not expect perfect correspondence among these assessments, as each type of analysis draws upon different knowledge bases and reaches its conclusions with regard to (at times) highly different criteria. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note the correspondences that do exist between these assessments and to reflect on differences with their implications for Beacons policy.

In Table 3, the names of authorities mentioned by each interviewee have been analysed in the DEA e.g. Interview 1 mentioned the following authorities as being the top performers in Accessible Services; Brent, Bromley, Tameside, Hillingdon, Taunton Deane and West Sussex.

In general, the following tables show *considerable overlap* in the conclusions from these two assessment techniques. Within the Accessible Services theme for example (Table 3), two of the three interviewees consistently cited authorities that scored in the upper half of the efficiency distribution. That is, these experts tended to choose local authorities that the DEA technique characterised as relatively ‘close’ to the frontier. This pattern can be seen in the comparison of the average efficiency scores for interviewee selections to that of the DEA analysis. Similar patterns can be seen with regard to the Regeneration through Culture, Sport and Tourism theme (Table 4).

Table 3: Authorities mentioned by respondents as having 'good practice' in Accessible Services

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 2A	Model 3	Overall
	Brent	59.04%	65.23%	66.59%		63.62%
	Bromley	89.01%				89.01%
	Tameside	81.15%	84.16%	84.16%	88.84%	84.58%
	Hillingdon	60.44%	70.06%	72.72%	75.51%	69.68%
	Taunton Deane					
	West Sussex					
Interview 1	Average	72.41%	73.15%	74.49%	82.18%	75.56%
	Bromley	89.01%				89.01%
	Camden					
	Hertfordshire	77.35%	82.71%	82.71%	90.67%	83.36%
	Sunderland					
	Tameside	81.15%	84.16%	84.16%	88.84%	84.58%
	West Sussex					
	Sedgemoor					
	Shepway					
Interview 2	Average	82.50%	83.43%	83.43%	89.76%	84.78%
	Bromley	89.01%				89.01%
	Camden					
	Carrick					
	Croydon	65.45%	67.41%	67.41%	69.66%	67.48%
	Hertfordshire	77.35%	82.71%	82.71%	90.67%	83.36%
	Ipswich					
	Lewisham	72.77%	87.34%	92.58%	91.61%	86.07%
	Liverpool					
	Newcastle	78.68%	95.04%	100.00%		91.24%
	Sunderland					
	Tameside	81.15%	84.16%	84.16%	88.84%	84.58%
	West Sussex					
Interview 3	Average	77.40%	83.33%	85.37%	85.19%	82.82%
DEA	Average	79.89%	82.07%	82.26%	87.74%	82.99%

Table 4: Authorities mentioned by respondents as having 'good practice' in Regeneration through Culture, Sport and Tourism

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Camden	59.09%		
Newham	59.09%	66.05%	66.05%
Leeds	100.00%	97.86%	95.85%
Manchester	59.89%	83.53%	83.53%
Newcastle	58.41%	89.48%	87.40%
Nottingham	69.32%	88.36%	84.58%
Sandwell	44.59%	77.29%	76.41%
Warwickshire	77.84%		
Average	68.34%	87.30%	85.55%
DEA Average	65.55%	85.12%	84.33%

While we can state that the Independent Living For Older People theme technically demonstrated a similar pattern, a reluctance on the part of experts to 'name' best performers left us with a sample of only two authorities. To speak of averages based on such a small number might be misleading.

Table 5: Authorities mentioned by respondents as having 'good practice' in Independent Living for Older People

	Model 1	Model 2
Spelthorne	100.00%	100.00%
Oxfordshire		71.42%
Average	100.00%	85.71%
DEA Average	90.50%	81.02%

The tendency for the reputational assessments to generally support the rational measurements is important, in that these correspondences can offset any shortcomings of rational measurements. Rational measurements do not take into account local measurement, things that make local authorities unique. The most basic premise is that all local authorities are comparable. In all service themes, for instance, we produced no less than two models of performance reflecting the different perspectives of performance that are possible in such evaluations. The fact that the eventual measurement outcomes tended to concur with those assessments independently derived by experts suggests some areas of substantive overlap.

The DEA is valuable for being able to undertake systematic comparison across authorities, though the analysis is less robust where there are correlated variables, therefore the choice of performance indicators to use in the analysis is crucial. The

analysis shows that for some services the applicant pool is no different from the population of English authorities, while for other services it is possible to say that the applicant pool is performing to a higher standard. In both cases, the application process leads to a higher average i.e. higher performing authorities are getting through the selection.

The two forms of analysis together have a satisfying degree of overlap, and this provides some validation of each procedure. Those authorities with the higher reputations are, by and large, the better performing authorities. The use of the two approaches together therefore, is a reasonable test of the selection of the best, and does suggest that the current procedure - a Beacons Advisory Panel with specialist knowledge combined with an examination of performance data - is able to achieve a satisfactory selection process among those that apply for Beacon status. However, the procedures cannot ensure that all the best authorities apply – that is a political, managerial and organizational judgement of the costs and benefits of particular avenues and activities.

Alternative service awards

It was suggested that all awards are important to local authorities and outsiders, but some were regarded as being more important than others. The LGC Council of the Year awards were described as being *'the 'local government Oscars' – all gloss and not terribly important'*. Investors in People was mentioned as being an important award.

Some had fairly sceptical views about the value of awards with the exception of Chartermark. In some of the themes there were no awards that matched with the theme definition. In one theme, Accessible Services, Pathfinder was suggested as a more attractive and lucrative alternative. One interviewee argued that there was nothing else that was designed for the same purpose as the Beacon Council Scheme. *'The value of the Beacon scheme is not the gong but what you have to do to get it - a structured dissemination programme is what makes it different'*.

Views on the Beacon Council Scheme

All interviewees agreed that the scheme is a great idea in theory but there are a number of problems in its execution. One respondent described the scheme as being *'rough and ready'* when it was first introduced, but there have been improvements and development since this time.

The Beacon Council Scheme was regarded as being a good award to achieve but not considered as being a significant factor when an authority is inspected (unless the inspection takes place in a service awarded a Beacon award). The logo was said to be noticeable but it doesn't signify that the whole council is excellent.

Interviewees distinguished between the context of the scheme, in terms of the pace and extent of local government modernisation and the scheme itself. Some expressed scepticism about the scheme from its inception and others saw it as less relevant or *'overtaken by events, due to the lack of delivery on the initial promise of freedoms and flexibilities and the changed emphasis to Public Service Agreements'*. One participant

suggested that improving local authority performance is relevant but that the relevance of the scheme was a different matter. Another commented, *'I take no notice of it now'* and a third suggested that the scheme needs to be seen to be more as one part of a structured approach to delivery. *'What is the place of the Beacon Council Scheme in the overall structure? Are there links that need to be made to PSA, CPA, peer review and peer support? If it doesn't make connections, it risks being irrelevant'*. A consistent performance management system would create a platform for beacons as high performers but without this framework, the scheme's value is diluted.

One respondent mentioned two areas of difficulty with the scheme. First, the good practice is put on too high a pedestal. Rather than admitting that nearly all authorities have good practice, but these successful councils have taken the time to document it, the message of the scheme is that a fantastic authority has been found with special performance. *'These authorities then go around strutting their stuff with their logos'*. Second, the cross-cutting nature of the themes has not been thought through. These themes may exclude some authorities from applying. Cross-cutting themes are seen to over-complicate the scheme.

Attractions of the scheme

Confidence relating to the peer group is very important in deciding whether to apply for Beacon status, according to one interviewee. If an authority achieves the award it gives them confidence to go further. For other authorities without success, they can see Authority X win the award and think *that 'if they can do it, so can we'*. What perhaps is more important is that the scheme is attractive to all authorities.

The scheme provides a stock of exemplars and the winners should be in a good position to share their good ('best') practice. The award helps to improve staff morale and can attract staff to the authority.

Recognition at national level, opportunity to raise organizational profile, increased confidence for employees and 'unlocking' access to resources (internally and externally) were perceived attractions of the scheme. Some valued the scheme for its celebration of and encouragement to share what is good in local government. One participant was critical of the scheme's approach to learning, which needs to be seen as a continuous process and longer-term investment. There was considerable doubt and scepticism about future attractions of the scheme.

For some respondents, the award is 'another badge' which helps PR but does not drive performance in the authority. Many new schemes and requirements have been introduced since the scheme, all of which compete for attention and resources. One interviewee commented, *'Once authorities used to put it on their headed notepaper, now I'm not sure some would have room'*.

b

Several respondents did not feel that they were able to express an informed opinion about whether the best authorities applied to the scheme. Those who did feel sufficiently well informed to answer thought that not all of the best authorities had

applied. Some interviewees had participated in the Beacon Council selection process and expressed surprise at the absence of *'some extremely good'* local authorities. Suggested reasons for this included the amount of work involved in the application process and the alternative choice to apply for schemes that offered substantial funding, as well as the decline in perceived relevance of the Beacon scheme.

Resource implications were mentioned by a number of respondents as being a significant reason stopping some very good authorities from applying for Beacon status. One interviewee asked whether it is worth the effort applying. There are also many awards on offer and it takes time to make any application. He commented that it took four and a half person years to get City status. There is no significant monetary award linked to the scheme. This is not a problem for those authorities that have a culture of celebrating success, but this is not the case for all councils. Many interviewees thought that councils had taken a deliberate decision not to apply because the benefits of the scheme did not appear to merit the amount of effort required. This was related to the level of change authorities were facing and the risk of allocating scarce resources and being unsuccessful. Everybody in local government has a success story to tell but sometimes there is not a lot of evidence to back it up. One respondent suggested that the fear of failure may have an impact on some authorities not making an application – *'it can prick your bubble'*. There is also no recognition for not being successful (i.e. shortlisted).

Another reason given for not applying was that some authorities may have felt that they have already demonstrated to the outside world that they have best practice. This may have been achieved through professional networks. One local authority officer was *'not fussed whether we get Beacon status'*. It was described as being a bit of an ego trip. The 'best' may also not be applying for Beacon status because they have decided to get on with delivering the service without the need for accolades. With the introduction of local PSAs, it was remarked that there are more pressing concerns than the Beacon Council Scheme. The scheme was also criticised because of its narrowness compared to other awards.

Some were more cynical about the application process itself, which they thought might deter repeat applications. One interviewee who participated in the selection process commented, *'It's a lot of work, the bureaucracy is barking, ludicrous. As an assessor, I had to take the papers home and I had difficulty fitting them all into a taxi!'* Another assessor expressed concern that local authorities that had been shortlisted on the basis of performance in the service theme had been debarred because of concerns about performance in other services. Although the reasons for this were understood, it was perceived to be unfair and knowledge of this aspect of the selection process was likely to deter applicants.

Does the scheme award Beacons to the best local authorities?

There were mixed views whether the scheme awards Beacon status to the best authorities. Many thought that the councils that have received the Beacon award merited it but there may have been other authorities that didn't apply that performed equally well.

One interviewee suggested that it is normal for the number of applications to fluctuate over time. In the BURA awards (regeneration theme), there were many applications in the first few years and then the numbers dipped as a result of fatigue before picking up and stabilising. In order to keep the applications steady, the award must be seen as one worth having. The application process must be very strong but fair and it is important that the best practice is sustainable.

Some were more negative about the award being given to the best. *'It doesn't go to the best. The best councils didn't get Beacon Council status – there's horse trading between central and local government and local government is the passive recipient'*. One interviewee thought that the themes that were included specifically to encourage joint bids from a number of authorities had not succeeded because it was too much work and too complex to secure political agreement within the scheme timetable.

Another view was that some of the best authorities were not awarded Beacon status because of adverse (Social Services joint review or OFSTED) inspections and this called into question the definition of good overall performance. *'My view is that local authorities that had the plug pulled had some excellent practice that other local authorities could have learned from'*.

Criticism of the scheme included perceptions that the selection process was 'unsophisticated' and mechanistic and that the panel members were not sufficiently knowledgeable about specific themes.

The selection of Beacon Councils

Though our remit did not include an overall assessment of the efficacy of the Beacon Council screening and selection process, one significant characteristic of the process with regard to performance profiles became apparent. Examining the mean (DEA) performance scores of local authority sub-groups (i.e., applicant pool, short-listed group, designated Beacons group), one can note a clear tendency of average increases in performance as the vetting process proceeds. That is, designated Beacons groups tend to have average performance scores that are higher than those of the short-listed groups. Similarly, short-listed scores tend to be higher (on average) than those of the applicant pool.

This tendency toward increasing average performance scores as the selection process unfolds lends support to the notion that the panel and staff are, in general, making the 'right' decisions from the applications pool.

Naturally, such conclusions are somewhat tentative, in that this frontier analysis is made without the context of experimental design. In this analysis, we do not have a representative sample and cannot control the authorities applying for Beacon status. Nonetheless, the pattern of improving performance profiles within the selection process is highly suggestive that the vetting procedures are working 'properly.'

The future of the scheme

Most of those interviewed expressed reservations about the value of continuing the scheme. Some thought that its value would be perceived differently by local

authorities, depending upon their position, culture and need for external validation. Others thought that the law of diminishing returns applied, as the best performing authorities moved on and found other opportunities. In this context, the scheme might be of more value to encourage poor performers and could be used as a tool for driving through radical change. The scheme might be more attractive and realistic if there were a greater financial reward.

There were some concerns about the competitive elements of the Beacon scheme and of the performance management agenda more generally. One interviewee suggested that the future needed to focus on high performing authorities sharing an understanding of the factors that contributed to their performance. If the agenda is to improve local government across the board, there is a need to adopt a 'sector spirit' and to develop schemes and skills to share and disseminate good practice to help those councils that are struggling. *'There is a danger of the CPA categorising 20 to 25 percent as poor performing – a blight. Who will work in a failing authority? How to bring the poorest up? You've got to go in, work with them, carry them forward'*. Radical measures would be needed, such as a change in the career structure that would include making a contribution to 'turning around' a struggling local authority as a prerequisite to becoming a strategic manager.

Others were more pessimistic about the future of the scheme. One interviewee perceived local authorities to be overwhelmed and wondered where the energy, enthusiasm and capacity would come from to meet future demands. Another saw the scheme as a 'past its sell by date product.' He added, *'they should wind it up and kill it quietly, soon. Its shelf life has gone'*. Another respondent who felt that the model of learning was flawed, commented, *'I would put a big question mark over the whole thing and its value – in terms of outcomes, it's not the sort of process that would be helpful in developing good practice'*.

Improvements to the scheme

The scheme needs to build and maintain its credibility to local government. This is not easy to achieve but it was remarked that the scheme should not be altered very often or it will potentially lose face. One interviewee asked what benefits local authorities got from the scheme. The financial inducements need to be much stronger as there are lots of other competing awards.

A possible idea is for the government to give resources to authorities to improve. At the first stage, authorities apply with their evidence of best practice and ideas for improvement. In order to help all authorities, resources are given to help authorities to improve. If money is given to ten authorities and five are successful, then this could be a good result.

There needs to be more emphasis on quality learning methods that encourage poor performers without creating a sense of winners and losers and promotes the need for continuous improvement and learning. One mechanism would be more use of 'twinning' the top performers (the Beacons) with the strugglers. Learning networks would also be beneficial at local or regional level. *'Learning networks are more low-key but can be much more creative and productive. People are sent away with new ideas and encouragement, not with disappointment and the feeling they had failed'*.

The themes need to be relevant to local government and perhaps linked to PSAs. A PSA target could reflect a Beacon theme area. Examples of innovation should be built upon and backed-up with resources to enable further improvements. On the other hand, another respondent argued that more links with other initiatives (e.g. Best Value) would sound the death knell of the scheme. What is important about the scheme is its distinctiveness as a mechanism for learning and improvement.

Conclusions

The research has shown that respondents were able to name a number of councils that were perceived to be amongst the current top performing authorities. Some councils, usually London and metropolitan boroughs, were named by several interviewees as being the top performers.

Within the four Beacon themes, there was a great deal of variability in identifying the 'best'. This was partly the result of the lack of clarity regarding performance indicators. Most respondents thought that the position of top performing authorities changed over time. The speed of change at the top of the league was dependent upon the Beacon theme. For example, the leaders in the field of Accessible Services are developing very rapidly and the top performing authorities change on a short time cycle. This contrasts to the Regeneration theme where it takes time to build reputation and make improvements on the ground.

Evidence suggests that many of the Beacons are top performers but that other top performers are not applying for Beacon status. Some authorities are not applying because the benefits of the scheme do not outweigh the time and effort it takes to apply and disseminate best practice if successful. Other top performing authorities feel that they have already demonstrated their good performance in other arenas and suggest the Beacon Council Scheme has been overtaken by other initiatives that are supported with more resources (e.g. PSAs).

To conclude, there could be a benefit in placing more emphasis on quality learning methods that encourage authorities across the range of performance without creating a sense of winners and losers. The idea of 'twinning' the top performers (the Beacons) with the strugglers was supported by a number of interviewees.

APPENDIX 1

Monitoring and evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme: reports and papers by the Warwick research team

Downe, J, Rashman, L and Hartley J (2002) Monitoring and evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme: Why local authorities do or do not apply to become Beacon councils. London: IDeA/DTLR

Downe J and Hartley J (2002) Research into Beacon Council Scheme Applications: Identifying trends in applications and in selection. London: IDeA/DTLR

Storbeck, J. (2002) Are the 'best' authorities applying? Part 1: Independent Living for Older People London: IDeA/DTLR

Storbeck, J. (2002) Are the 'best' authorities applying? Part 2: Accessible Services London: IDeA/DTLR

Storbeck, J. (2002) Are the 'best' authorities applying? Part 3: Regenerating through Culture, Tourism and Sport London: IDeA/DTLR

Storbeck, J. (2002) Are the 'best' authorities applying? Part 4: Foster Care London: IDeA/DTLR

Hartley J, Rashman L, Downe J and Storbeck J (2001) Monitoring and evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme: Report of the process outcomes evaluation. London: IDeA/DTLR

Hartley, J, Rashman, L, Storbeck, J, and Downe, J (2001) Researching Beacon Councils - Evaluation, activities and outputs. London: DTLR/IDeA

Hartley J, Rashman L and Gulati A (2000) Leading and learning: perceptions and attitudes about the Beacon Council Scheme and motivations for attending events. London: IDeA/DTLR

Hartley J, Storbeck J and Rashman L (2000) Monitoring and evaluation of the Beacon Council Scheme: feasibility of an impact evaluation on service delivery. London: DETR/IDeA

Rashman L and Hartley J (in press) Leading and learning? Knowledge transfer in the Beacon Council Scheme. Public Administration

APPENDIX 2

Short-listed and beacon councils in four of the round 2 Beacon themes

	Shortlisted councils	Beacon Councils
Accessible Services	Brent Hampshire Knowsley Lewisham South Gloucestershire Stoke on Trent Tameside West Sussex with Horsham and Mid Sussex	Knowsley Lewisham Tameside West Sussex with Horsham and Mid Sussex
Independent Living for Older People	Camden Enfield Leeds Manchester Oxfordshire Sandwell Spelthorne	Camden Leeds Manchester Spelthorne
Regenerating through Culture, Tourism and Sport	Colchester Gateshead Knowsley Newham Nottingham Southwark Sunderland	Gateshead Knowsley Nottingham Sunderland
Foster Care	Bexley Cheshire Southwark	Bexley Cheshire

APPENDIX 3:

Beacon applications interview schedule

Objective 3: Determining whether the best local authorities apply for Beacon status

Date:

Interviewer:

Organisation:

Organisation phone number:

Interviewee name:

Interviewee phone number:

Role:

Service theme:

- Accessible services
- Regenerating through culture, sport and tourism
- Raising attainment in education
- Independent living and older people

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research conducted by the Local Government Centre on behalf of the DTLR and the IDeA. I will ask you about your views on good practice and performance in local authorities and in particular within a specific service theme (*specify*). I will also ask you about your views on the Beacon Council Scheme. Your comments will be put together with others to provide feedback to the DTLR and IDeA. I will be making notes as we go through. Your name and role will not be identified to assure confidentiality. The discussion should take about 25 minutes.

Background

1. Please would you briefly outline your role?
2. How much contact do you have with local authorities in relation to the Beacon theme area?
3. Would you explain how your role enables you to make an assessment of local authority performance?

(Is this in a formal or informal capacity? (e.g. inspection role)

4. How much innovation or improved performance do you see in local authorities in terms of a): corporate performance and b): service delivery? Please give examples.

Top performing local authorities and good practice

5. What would you say are the distinguishing features of the top performing authorities?
 - *Is there anything common to all of them or are there distinctive features specific to each authority?*
 - *political environment?*
 - *capability of corporate centre?*
 - *approach to organizational change and learning?*
 - *organizational capacity?*
 - *private sector engagement?*
6. Do you have a clear sense of who are the current top performing local authorities? Can you name them?
7. Would you say that the positions of the top performers are fairly stable or changing? (What influences these changes and over what period is change occurring?)
8. Are some authorities better at spin than substance? Does their PR affect perceptions of ‘the best’?
9. I would now like to turn to the Beacon theme area. What are the characteristics of leading edge authorities in this specific theme (*specify*)?

Probe to obtain several criteria and names of authorities.

Which of these authorities are Beacons in the theme?

10. Would you say the best authorities are spread across the range of size and type of authority (i.e. District, Met, Unitary, County) or do they tend to be mainly one type? If so which?
11. Are you aware of other service awards in this theme area (and the winners)?

Views on the Beacon Council Scheme

12. Would you say that the context of the Beacon Council Scheme has changed so as to make it more (or less) relevant than previously?
13. What is attractive about the scheme to top performing authorities?
14. Are the best local authorities applying?

15. Why might the best authorities not be applying?
- *Political priorities*
 - *Strategic priorities*
 - *Type/size of authority*
 - *Relevant themes available*
 - *Deliberate decision not to apply*
 - *Previous application experience*
 - *Change overload*
 - *Other award or scheme seen as more beneficial*
 - *Changing response to scheme over time*
16. To what extent does the scheme award Beacons to the best local authorities?
17. Why might the best authorities not be selected?
18. Do you think that the top performing local authorities will be attracted to the scheme in the future?