

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION FOR SCOTTISH COUNCILS

Data Compendium 2000/2001

Comparing the performance of Scottish councils



The Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission is a statutory, independent body, which through the audit process, assists local authorities in Scotland to achieve the highest standards of financial stewardship and the economic, efficient and effective use of their resources. The Commission has five main responsibilities:

- securing the external audit
- following up issues of concern identified through the audit, to ensure satisfactory resolutions
- reviewing the management arrangements which audited bodies have in place to achieve value for money
- carrying out national value for money studies to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local government
- issuing an annual direction to local authorities which sets out the range of performance information which they are required to publish.

The Commission secures the audit of 32 councils and 34 joint boards (including police and fire services). Local authorities spend over £9 billion of public funds a year.

Audit Scotland

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland. Together they ensure that the Scottish Executive and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of public funds.

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The Commission has also published:

- council 'profiles' analysing indicators on a council-by-council basis
- a series of seven pamphlets, covering:
 - Benefits, Finance and Corporate issues
 - Education services
 - Environmental and Regulatory services
 - Fire and Police services
 - Housing services
 - Leisure and Libraries
 - Social work services

Each of these reports is available from Audit Scotland or may be downloaded from our website at: www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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Foreword

I am pleased to present this report on the performance information relating to the main services provided by councils in 2000/2001. These services are important to all of us. They cover, for example, police and fire services, the education of our children, refuse collection and disposal, leisure and library facilities, street lighting and home care for the elderly.

Councils are committed to seeking to achieve continuous improvement in the delivery of their services. Demonstrating progress towards better services requires each council's performance to be monitored over time and compared with others so that, where better practice is identified, it can be adopted. Robust information about the services provided, the standards set and the results achieved by councils assists both professionals and the public to judge how well councils are performing.

In this report we have provided performance information for 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/01, allowing comparison by council and between councils over the three years. In addition, the information is also available on accompanying disks and from our website: www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

Audit Scotland staff work closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, (COSLA), the Society of local Authority Chief Executives and the Scottish Executive on a Joint performance Information Review Group to improve the indicators and to develop ways of refining the information councils are asked to provide. We will continue to work with all interested bodies to develop the performance information we require councils to publish and to ensure that it is published in ways that make it useful to a range of audiences.

I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Commission, to thank all council officials, COSLA, The Scottish Executive and representatives of professional bodies and inspectorates for their contributions to this work.

Alastair MacNish

Chairman

The Accounts Commission for Scotland

Introduction

Since 1993/94, councils have been required by law to provide information on how well they are carrying out their activities. Councils have to publish the information in local newspapers by 30 September each year.

The Local Government Act 1992 places upon the Commission the duty each year to direct local authorities to publish information which will, in the Commission's opinion, assist in the making of appropriate comparisons - by reference to the criteria of cost, economy, efficiency and effectiveness - between:

- the standards of performance achieved by different authorities in a financial year
- the standards of performance achieved by authorities in different financial years.

This report, prepared by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission, is the eighth national report on the performance of councils under the Local Government Act 1992 and it:

- helps readers to form a view as to how Scottish councils performed in 2000/2001 and provides comparison with previous years
- seeks to stimulate interest in, and debate on, the performance of local government in Scotland.

We expect some public interest in this report, but anticipate that the principal users will be those acting on the public's behalf in providing services and monitoring performance (for example, local councillors, council officials, councils' auditors).

As in previous years, this national report is presented in a series of sections designed to enable readers with an interest in particular services to gain easy access to the relevant information.

This first section provides general information about the way in which the Commission:

- selects the information it requires councils to provide
- seeks to ensure that reliable information is published
- differentiates between economy, efficiency and effectiveness in assessing performance.

It then discusses ways in which the information might be used and identifies a number of general points to be considered when making comparisons between councils.

Subsequent sections cover each of the services for which there are indicators. For each indicator within the service the report:

- shows details of the indicator for 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001
- discusses what the indicator reports
- identifies points that should be borne in mind before making comparisons with the information for other councils
- provides a table showing the information for each council
- identifies those councils for which, in the auditor's opinion, the information provided may be unreliable.

Since this report is primarily for use by those wishing to undertake their own analysis of the data, no commentary or findings are included for individual indicators. Nevertheless, for several indicators benchmark performance standards exist and councils' performance might be assessed against these.

Whilst the published information will raise many questions as to what is in fact 'good' performance or 'best practice', in many cases further information would be required before answers could be provided. Local factors may mean that a council with a performance which

appears to be worse than that of another council has, in fact, performed better given the more difficult circumstances it faces.

The information held on Audit Scotland's database was checked by each authority in order to give them an opportunity to be satisfied that the information to be published was correct. In a few cases there are differences between the information published in this report and that published in councils' statutory advertisements. Generally, this is because further enquiries by the auditor on behalf of Audit Scotland, identified the need for correction to the locally published figure.

The data-set for each of the services is available in electronic form on accompanying disks, using Microsoft Excel 2000. Copies of the disks are available on request from Audit Scotland. The information is also available on Audit Scotland's website:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

Indicator selection

As far as possible, the indicators measure aspects of the performance of a service that are of interest to the public and of importance to relevant service managers. A number of the indicators measure quantity of, and expenditure on, an activity. The Commission believes that indicators based on quantity and efficiency (including economy) assist in making comparisons of performance. A number of the indicators measure speed of response to a request for a service to be provided; this is an important aspect of the effectiveness of a service.

We have had to strike a balance between selecting sufficient indicators to reflect the diversity of council services while not overwhelming users. Also, regard has to be given to the amount of work involved for councils in putting in place sound management systems for information gathering and reporting.

There are a number of separate Government charters which also require the publication of important performance information. For example, school examination results are published by The Scottish Executive under the Parents' Charter. In order to avoid duplication, we do not collect and publish this information.

Reflecting Best Value within the statutory PIs has required Audit Scotland to work with partners, particularly the COSLA, SOLACE and the Scottish Executive, in order to improve its indicators. To achieve this, we have clarified our criteria for PI selection by recognising that the statutory PIs should:

- be focused on the output or outcome of service delivery, but be balanced by a range of efficiency indicators to allow a rounded view of how well services are delivered.
- be subject to broad agreement as to whether a change represents an improvement or deterioration in performance
- refer to nationally set or agreed targets or standards rather than local ones, so that inter-authority comparison can be drawn on a more like-for-like basis.

These additional criteria will lead to a number of the indicators being amended over the next few years. During this transitional phase Audit Scotland will:

- work with partners to develop the indicators to the point where they do meet the criteria, if this is considered appropriate. For instance, housing repairs is clearly a significant service area to tenants and yet there are no national standards or guidelines for repair targets.
- encourage partners to develop other mechanisms for the collection of the data. Generally we see this as taking some years, but as also directly in line with the use of benchmarking under BV.
- recognise relevant indicators as 'transitional' in all our publications. We believe that it is important to maintain an awareness of the limitations of these indicators. Although, inevitably, they will need to be used for some inter-authority comparison until we have something better, we believe that it will be helpful to all concerned to recognise their limitations in terms of our own criteria.

In accordance with the agreed strategy, all of these indicators have been identified as 'transitional' in the following sections of this report.

Economy, efficiency and effectiveness

Various criteria can be used to assess performance, most of which can be grouped under one of three headings - economy, efficiency or effectiveness. Additional types of measure may be important for particular services (eg quality, equity). The criteria can be illustrated through taking two examples of council services which should be familiar to most people: the running of a swimming pool, and housing repairs.

Economy measures deal with the cost of acquiring the various resources that are used in providing the service. So, for example, for the swimming pool, the council would measure the amount spent on the chemicals for treating the water to make sure it was using the cheapest supplier who could provide the required quality. The aim is to ensure that, for a specified standard, it is not paying more than it needs to. It could also measure the cost of heating the pool water and check if there were alternative energy suppliers who could meet its needs more cheaply. For the housing repairs service, it would check to see that it was acquiring all the materials required (eg paint, window frames) at the cheapest price consistent with the necessary quality.

Efficiency measures are used to evaluate how much output is produced for the amount of resources used in providing a service. For example, the council would look at the number of cleaners required to keep the pool up to the required standard of cleanliness, and the time they took to do this. It would then compare this with similar operations to see whether the cleaning could be carried out more efficiently (ie using fewer cleaners or a shorter time to achieve the same standard). For the housing service, it may check the productivity of the trades people (eg plumbers, joiners).

Effectiveness is about whether the service is achieving what it was intended to achieve. Clearly, effectiveness depends upon first having decided what the objectives are for a service or a facility. For example, if the council sets itself a policy of encouraging all children in its area to learn to swim by the age of six by running free swimming classes in its pools, it can then measure whether it has achieved this goal. If it finds that for a particular pool, very few children have made use of it, it would need to find out whether the policy was mistaken (eg there was no public demand because the children could swim already), or whether the policy was not being implemented adequately (eg the public were not aware that the classes were being run).

The 1992 Act does not include 'quality' as one of the criteria to be used by the Commission, but quality may be viewed as one aspect of effectiveness inasmuch as poor quality might hinder the achievement of a council's objectives. The measurement of 'quality' can be difficult, as one person's idea of what is good quality may be different from that of another person. In other words, whether a service user thinks that the quality of service was satisfactory will have a lot to do with whether the service matched his or her expectations. In relation to a swimming pool, for example, factors such as water temperature, staff attitudes and helpfulness, the level of cleanliness, the attractiveness of the building, the quality of the catering services, and the shower and locker facilities, will influence a user's perception of service quality.

The Commission's Direction for 2000/2001 includes some indicators which specifically address service quality - for example, Social Work Indicator 7, which reports the extent to which residential care is provided in the form of single rooms and rooms with en-suite facilities. The Commission's report 'Narrowing the Gap' (1994) addresses the principles of satisfactory customer service and makes recommendations on best practice to Scottish councils.

Using the performance information

Comparing performance

When considering a council's performance, comparisons can be made in three ways:

- the standard of performance achieved by the same council over two or more years, ie same-council comparison over time
- the performance achieved by other councils for the same activity, in the same year, ie inter-council comparison
- the standard of performance compared with national standards.

Same-council comparison: many of the indicators presented in this report can be used to consider how the performance of councils' services has changed over time. However, some of the indicators have either had changes in definition since earlier years or have changed in terms of the collected data. In such cases, direct comparison over time may not be possible or appropriate.

Inter-council comparison: some indicators can also be used to compare the performance of different councils for the same year. This is the case where there is a reasonable consistency between councils in what they are trying to achieve. For example, one of the responsibilities of education departments is to undertake the assessment of children with special educational needs. It is reasonable to compare the performance of councils for this service, as they are all aiming to complete the process to a similar professional standard.

On the other hand, the performance may be reported in relation to a target set by each council, making inter-council comparisons difficult where targets differ. For example, in Housing, Indicator 1 reports the percentage of repairs completed by a council within locally set target response times.

National standards: where there is a national standard, the extent to which each council has achieved the standard can be compared directly. An example of a national standard is that food hygiene inspections should be undertaken within prescribed time periods depending on the food risk category. One of the indicators for the environmental health service reports the extent to which councils have met these targets. Any local variations in circumstances should be taken into account by service managers to ensure that the national standard is still met.

Making comparisons

Each of the statutory performance indicators is designed to assist members of the public to gain an understanding of the cost, economy, efficiency or effectiveness with which council services are delivered.

A number of factors may have an impact on the reported performance information. It is important to be aware of these in order to understand why councils' results may vary considerably. Some of the factors are population size, population density, and the mix between urban and rural settlements. Others may be specific to a particular service or the groups of people it serves. For each indicator, a section called 'Points to bear in mind' identifies some of the relevant factors.

Most of the major activities within each service are reflected in the selection of indicators. However, no single indicator provides sufficient evidence upon which to base a judgement as to the provision of a complete service, such as education. Also, an indicator may conceal variations in performance within a council. For example, if a council has four swimming pools of varying ages and conditions, offering different types of facilities, attendance levels at each of them may be quite different. Generally, the information in this publication is

reported in relation to the whole council rather than the location in which a service is delivered. However, in previous years there were a few cases where a council had different locally set targets for the delivery of a service in distinct parts of its area and reported each separately.

Finally, except where quality is directly addressed by the definition of the indicator, no comment is made on the quality of services provided. For example, two councils may spend similar amounts on a particular client group (eg the elderly) as part of their social work provision. However, the quality and appropriateness of the services experienced by the users may be markedly different depending upon the skills of the staff, managerial practices and other factors.

Data reliability

The Local Government Act 1992 places a responsibility on local authorities to:

- make arrangements to collect and record the required information so that it is available for publication
- publish information which, as far as is practicable, is accurate and complete.

To assist councils to collect the information on a consistent basis, we provide them each year with a Guide that contains:

- definitions of terms for each indicator, and clarification on how the information should be compiled
- details of a 'helpline' provided by Audit Scotland to answer queries from councils and auditors
- guidance on proposed management arrangements within a council for ensuring that each of its services supplies the required information on time
- guidance on the role of the external auditors, appointed by the Commission, in reviewing the systems being used to produce the information and, where appropriate, highlighting where improvements need to be made.

The work undertaken by councils' auditors to review information systems each year identifies a number of cases where, in the auditor's opinion, there are doubts about the authority's arrangements for producing the information. In such cases comparisons with other councils should be made with care. To facilitate this, each section of the report relating to a specific service contains a table showing, by council, which information should be treated as potentially unreliable.

The appendix provides a summary of these tables and also indicates which councils failed to report (ftr) information for particular indicators in 2000/2001.

Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission are concerned that the quality of the data provided by councils should continue to improve and, through the audit process, are advising councils of the improvements required to their data collection and recording systems.

Key to information

The information tables in the following sections make use of a number of conventions to explain the lack of data in particular cells:

- ‘Not reported’ means that the authority failed to report the required information
- ‘No category’ means that the authority classified none of its area within the specified risk category
- ‘No service’ means that the authority did not offer the service
- an empty cell indicates that there was no applicable data.

Strike action and Foot & Mouth disease

Some services were disrupted during 2000/2001 by strike action and by the outbreak of foot & mouth disease. The following councils have indicated that, for the services shown below, their performance may have been affected.

Strike action:

Benefits administration	City of Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, Fife, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire
Building control	City of Edinburgh, East Renfrewshire, West Dunbartonshire
Corporate issues	West Dunbartonshire
Environmental health	West Dunbartonshire
Environmental services	Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde, Midlothian, Perth & Kinross, West Lothian
Finance	Argyll & Bute, City of Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Eilean Siar, Fife, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, Highland, West Dunbartonshire, West Lothian.
Housing	Aberdeen, City of Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, Eilean Siar, Fife, Inverclyde, South Ayrshire, West Dunbartonshire.
Leisure services	East Renfrewshire, South Ayrshire
Libraries	East Dunbartonshire, Fife
Planning	City of Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, West Dunbartonshire
Trading standards	Aberdeenshire, Falkirk, West Dunbartonshire

Foot & Mouth disease:

Environmental health	Argyll & Bute, East Ayrshire
Environmental services	Inverclyde
Trading standards	Argyll & Bute, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, Perth & Kinross

