



Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister

Creating sustainable communities

*Government Response to the
Review of the Beacon Council Scheme*

July 2005



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FOREWORD



The Beacon Scheme has gone from strength to strength since it was launched in 1999. It has provided both an opportunity to celebrate excellence in local government as well as spread best practice to help all local authorities improve the services they deliver to the public.

To make sure the Scheme itself continues to follow best practice, in October 2004 we asked the Advisory Panel for Beacon Councils to undertake a comprehensive review and to recommend how the scheme can best support the Government's agenda. At the same time we commissioned a review on the role of the Panel. This report sets out the Government response to recommendations from both reviews.

Overall the scheme is working well and neither review suggests making fundamental changes. The recommendations focus on improving the day-to-day administration of the scheme for all involved, particularly participating councils. They also suggest strengthening the role of the Panel and increasing the part Government Departments play in spreading best practice highlighted through the Scheme. These measures will ensure that the Beacon Scheme continues to make a major contribution in helping local government improve life and restore civic pride in our communities.

I would like to thank the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils for undertaking the review of the Scheme as well as the Improvement and Development Agency for providing support. They managed, successfully, to carry out the review at the same time as the assessment process for Round 6 was underway. I would also like to thank our in-house policy consultancy for leading the review of the Panel.

Finally I would like to thank everyone in local government and past panel members who have contributed both to the reviews and to the Scheme over the past 6 years. I am confident the Beacon Scheme will continue to take forward the best of local government in the years ahead.

Phil Woolas
Minister for Local Government

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Beacon Council Scheme was introduced in 1999 with the aim of identifying centres of excellence from which others could learn. The scheme has been a success. However in October 2004 Nick Raynsford, the Minister for Local and Regional Government commissioned a review of the scheme (and of the Advisory Panel who provide advice on the scheme) to look at how we could build on that success.

This document provides the Government's response to the reviews and highlights the changes that will take place as a result. A summary of changes are outlined below:

REVIEW OF THE PANEL

The Government will:

1. Expand the Terms of Reference of the Panel to include providing advice on:
 - themes
 - selection criteria
 - authorities that should be awarded beacon status
 - dissemination
 - promotion and marketing of the scheme
2. Work with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to:
 - Improve the recruitment and induction for the both core and specialist panel members.
 - Improve the administration of the assessment processes including reducing unnecessary paperwork the core panel members receive and strengthening the role of specialist panel members
3. Work with the Panel and IDeA to ensure that the dissemination element of the scheme is strengthened, this may include as appropriate expanding the role of specialist panel members.

REVIEW OF THE BEACON COUNCIL SCHEME

The Government:

1. will develop the Beacon Peer Support scheme further to make it more effective at supporting improvement in local authorities.
2. will consider how to strengthen the engagement of Government Departments in the scheme.
3. has strengthened the assessment of applicants ability to disseminate their best practices as part of Round 7 of the scheme
4. will work with the Panel, IDeA and relevant inspectorates to strengthen the links between the scheme and other initiatives, in particular the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.
5. has changed the name of the scheme to The Beacon Scheme to reflect the full range of authorities able to apply for beacon status.
6. has introduced a Beacon Partner logo to recognise the input partners have deliver excellent services and will continue to look at ways of further recognising the input of partners.
7. will continue to select themes that
 - reflect cross-cutting as well as service-specific areas
 - align directly with each of the shared priorities between central and local government
 - focus on those areas that directly produce tangible outcomes for customers and communities. This may also include 'back-office' or corporate subjects where appropriate
 - be of interest to a wide range of authorities of all types, sizes, and locations
8. has changed the theme selection criteria for Round 7 of the scheme.
9. will change the timetable for Round 8 of the scheme to give applicants more time to prepare their application as well as making the scheme more accessible to all who participate.
10. will continue to listen to stakeholders in the scheme to ensure that it remains relevant and contributes to delivering high quality public services.

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF THE SCHEME

The Beacon Council Scheme was introduced in the 1998 Local Government White Paper *Modernising Local Government: In Touch with the People* as a tool to help councils modernise. It was followed by a prospectus consulting local government and key stakeholders on the proposed scheme. The first application brochure was launched in May 1999 and the beacons announced later that year. Since then the scheme has gone from strength to strength and is now in its seventh round.

There have been a number of developments in the scheme since it began, the most significant of which were the expansion of the scheme to include all Best Value authorities announced in the 2002 Local Government White Paper: *Strong Local Leadership Better Public Services*. This was accompanied by the introduction of a rolling programme of themes, integrating the Comprehensive Performance Assessments into the scheme, and the establishment of the Panel as an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body.

More recently, the role of the IDeA has been expanded to ensure that there is a greater link between the assessment process and dissemination of good practices. The IDeA now provide the secretariat to the Panel as well as their traditional role helping authorities with their dissemination.

SUCCESSSES OF THE SCHEME

The scheme has attracted over 1200 applications from a wide range of local authorities and nearly 250 beacon awards have been made. More importantly, every English local authority has attended at least one of the learning activities organised in the first five rounds of the Scheme and independent research has shown that 79% of those attending events have instigated improvements as a result of their participation¹.

THE REVIEWS OF THE SCHEME AND THE ADVISORY PANEL

The review of the Scheme and the role of the Panel aimed to build on the success of the scheme and to ensure that it continued to make a contribution to the improvement and modernisation for local government. The terms of reference for the review of the Scheme is attached at Annex A. The objectives for the review of the Panel are at Annex B.

¹ Survey of Local Authorities: Rashman, Hartley and IFF Research - November 2004.

RESPONSES TO THE REVIEWS

The following sections address firstly the role of the panel and how that will change as a result of the review and then the Government's response to recommendations on the scheme itself.

The Role of the Panel

The Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils is an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB)². The Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils advises Ministers on the selection of beacon themes, the criteria for selecting beacons and to make formal recommendations to Ministers on which authorities should be awarded beacon status. The Panel consists of a Chair and nine members (listed at Annex C). In addition to the core membership, specialised members with expertise in each of the themes are appointed for one year.

Both the in-house policy consultancy and the Panel's review recommended either improvements in administration or in changes to the role of the Panel.

The review of the Panel looked at how effective the Panel in its current format is at providing advice on the scheme. It identified a number of improvements that will be addressed, particularly around strengthening recruitment and induction of members, reducing the amount of paperwork received by core members and administration around the assessment process. It also made similar recommendations to those identified by the Panel around strengthening the role of Government departments and specialist panel members. The Government, and Panel, have already implemented or will look at how best to implement these recommendations.

In addition, as part of the review of the Scheme the Panel made the following recommendations relating to its role:

² Advisory NDPBs provide independent and expert advice to ministers on particular topics of interest. They do not usually have staff but are supported by staff from their sponsoring department. They do not usually have their own budget, as costs incurred come within the department's expenditure.

A4: The role of the Panel be revised:

- the Panel to have oversight of the promotion and marketing of the Scheme
- the Panel to have oversight of the dissemination of best practice
- the Panel to have oversight of the budgets associated with the delivery of the Scheme
- Specialist Panel members role in the Scheme be extended to include involvement in the dissemination of best practice
- the Panel to oversee applications for resources to support continued Beacon-related learning drawing on the capacity building fund

The concurrent ODPM review of the role of the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils should take account of this recommendation.

The Panel has, since it began, had an important role advising and helping with promotion and marketing of the scheme as well as assessing dissemination ability and providing advice to the IDeA on dissemination. The Government and the IDeA are therefore content to extend the Panel's remit to include providing advice on both marketing and dissemination.

The Panel are an Advisory NDPB (as opposed to an Executive NDPB³) and do not have any budgets. There are a range of budgets associated with the Beacon Scheme, which include the staff resources in Government departments that have themes through to local government's contribution to the scheme which is top sliced to the IDeA as well as the programme budgets for grant funding held by ODPM. The Panel have a clear role in providing advice on the scheme which has an effect on these budgets. However it would not be possible to give them oversight of the range of budgets the scheme impacts upon. The Government therefore does not accept this recommendation.

Specialist Panel members are involved primarily with drafting the assessment criteria and taking part in the assessment process. Government recognises that some specialists have continued to be involved with the scheme after Beacon status is awarded, often in an advisory capacity and subject to resources being available from the sponsoring Department. However extending the role of Specialist Panel members into dissemination may make the role less attractive for some specialists and may prevent suitable candidates from taking part in the scheme. ODPM will discuss this further with Government departments and with Specialist Panel members.

The Panel were involved in assessing applications for the £2m Beacon Peer Support funding in 2004. ODPM is currently considering improvements to this programme following evaluation data and will include a role, as appropriate, for the Panel.

³ Executive NDPBs are established in statute and carrying out administrative, regulatory and commercial functions, they employ their own staff and are allocated their own budgets.

The Review of the Beacon Scheme

Outlined below are the recommendations made by the Panel (in shaded boxes) with the Government's response below. The response states whether we accept, reject or are considering further the panel's recommendations. In some cases, as appropriate, it gives examples of work already underway.

PART A: EXCELLENCE AND LEARNING

Panel recommendation A1: Access to additional funding through the capacity building fund or otherwise should be available to Beacon authorities that demonstrate effectiveness in sharing learning and best practice and have developed plans for future continuation of this work. Award of such funding should be accompanied by an extension to the Beacon tenure.

The Beacon Scheme is one element of the overall joint ODPM/LGA Capacity Building Programme. The £3m beacon reward grant, which is shared between the successful beacons, is from the funding allocation for the Capacity Building Programme. For the past two years an additional £2m has also been made available for beacons who were interested in undertaking peer support work with other authorities.

In addition some beacons who have demonstrated a clear commitment and effective dissemination methods have received additional funding either from the capacity building programme or other Government departments. Examples include the Round 4 Rural Economy beacons who are now working with Defra and IDeA to provide peer support; the Services for Older People Beacons who are taking part in a Shared Priority project in managed by the LGA supported by ODPM, DWP and DH; the Round 4 Tackling Homelessness beacons who are working with Housing colleagues in ODPM and funded by the Capacity Building Programme to undertake further work on tackling homelessness.

We are currently looking at how to improve these mechanisms for possibly linking peer support work with the franchising model being piloted by Kent and Swindon (which aims to improve Swindon's social services). We will advise beacons on how the Beacon Peer Support programme has been developed in the Autumn.

A2: Learning and dissemination should become a stronger part of the Beacon Council Scheme generally, for example, by all sponsoring Government Departments accepting responsibility for their role in promoting best practice in partnership with those authorities awarded Beacon status.

B3: Government Departments should build on their experience of promoting and working with Beacon authorities to engage them in developing policy and guidance, piloting new initiatives, profiling success and highlighting ways forward, and in supporting both national and regional improvement initiatives more generally.

B4: Government Departments that nominate Beacon themes should commit themselves to engagement with the Scheme by nominating a senior ‘champion’ in addition to an effective operational theme lead.

Government departments have a key role to play in the Beacon Scheme. From supporting theme development, assessment of councils and dissemination of best practice. Beacons can also help Government departments develop policy and test new approaches.

Whilst Government recognises that it can develop the role it plays in the Beacon Scheme further, there are many examples of Government departments playing an active role in dissemination of best practice and in using beacons to develop policy, integrating them into work to implement key Government strategies as well as in piloting new initiatives.

Some departments have established regular round table meetings with their beacons, held workshops to help them develop their dissemination practices and provided additional funding to help facilitate dissemination. Some departments have been involved in disseminating the good practices highlighted through the Beacon Scheme by integrating beacons into departments’ capacity building programmes, disseminating good practice regionally through the Government Office Network, publishing good practice on websites and in guidance documents.

Beacons are also fulfilling support/challenge functions, sit on advisory groups and networks, help drive forward Government strategies and public service agreements. However departments recognise they could be more consistent in their approach. Senior officials will be discussing what could be done to take forward these recommendations, building on the good practices already underway.

A3: The Beacons application and assessment process be adapted to include a stronger element of assessment based on an authority’s ability to learn and to disseminate learning about how change and improvement can be made to happen.

Applicants for Beacon status currently have to demonstrate excellence in their theme, good general performance and an ability and willingness to disseminate their good practices as part of the criteria set by Ministers. It is the Panel’s responsibility to assess these areas. At present the Panel assess part 3 of the application form that covers the authority’s dissemination plans. IDeA consultants also discuss this aspect with potential beacons throughout the assessment process.

The Government welcomes the Panel's commitment to strengthen the assessment of ability and willingness to disseminate best practice. ODPM have discussed how this can be taken forward with both the IDeA and the Panel. From Round 7 applicants will be assessed (for previous beacons) on their past record as well as future ability to dissemination. The IDeA will also provide a report at each short-listing stage to the Panel based on this assessment.

A5: The Panel, the ODPM and the IDeA, in consultation with key stakeholders in the local government world, should continue to monitor and review the Scheme in the spirit of continuous improvement, utilising ongoing research and monitoring by Warwick University.

The Panel's report highlights some of the improvements that have been made to the scheme since it began in 1999. The Government is committed to continuing with, and developing, the Beacon Scheme and therefore accepts this recommendation to work with key partners and stakeholders and independent researchers to continue to improve the scheme.

PART B: BEACONS, GOVERNMENT AND THE IMPROVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

The Beacon Council Scheme has more than proved its worth alongside the range of other complementary initiatives that stimulate and support local authority improvement, and as part of the broad drive by both central and local government to improve public services. However, more value would be achieved from the Scheme if appropriate linkages were developed and strengthened, and if the Beacon Council Scheme was more clearly recognised as being at the heart of the improvement and modernisation agenda.

The Panel recommends that the Beacon Council Scheme should be more closely linked to the wider development and delivery of public services policy, and to the wider programmes and initiatives that support local authority improvement. In particular:

B1: Links between the Beacon Council Scheme and the work of relevant inspectorates should be strengthened, especially the CPA process, which should draw freely on the applications and awards by authorities for Beacon status in developing a full and rounded view of an authority's achievements.

B2: Materials from successful Beacons should be more fully drawn on by other capacity building initiatives such as the Improvement Network established by the Audit Commission, IDeA, CIPFA, and the Employers' Organisation.

The Beacon Scheme is a central part of the local government modernisation agenda and has contributed to supporting councils improvement alongside Best Value, CPA and other initiatives.

The Audit Commission have initially said that whilst beacon status cannot (for the purpose of corporate assessment) be taken in isolation as a sufficient indication of strong achievement in a particular area, the work or initiatives undertaken in applying for or obtaining beacon status may well provide good evidence to support an authority's self-assessment. This would be particularly likely where the initiative demonstrated improved delivery of outcomes and local priorities within the area of a shared priority, or provided examples of vision or innovative practice in other areas such as user focus or community leadership.

ODPM and IDeA will discuss with the relevant inspectorates and organisations how links can be further strengthened.

PART C: IMPROVING THE OPERATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SCHEME

The operation of the Beacon Council Scheme has itself evolved and improved over the years as experience has grown about how best to stimulate and assess Beacon applications and to streamline the process. This can be built on.

The Panel recommends that additional refinements are made to the application and assessment process, and that the profile of the Scheme amongst the public services community and the public more generally should be raised significantly. In particular:

C1: Consideration should be given to changing the name of the Scheme to better reflect the range of authorities that are eligible to apply for Beacon status. The name would ideally be 'The Beacon Scheme' or the 'Beacon Authority Scheme'.

Government accepts this recommendation and will change the name to The Beacon Scheme when the Round 7 application brochure is launched.

C2: Partners should be recognised for their contribution to the success of a Beacon service.

The Beacon Scheme has always been about partnership. The scheme itself is a partnership between central and local government and councils delivering excellent services do so in partnership. However this has been something that the scheme has not overtly recognised: the award is made to the authorities; the grant is paid to the authorities; even the logo is solely for the use of authorities.

To address this balance it was decided to introduce a partnership logo for Round 6. This is given to authorities, at their discretion, to give to their partners who helped them deliver the excellence they were awarded beacon status for.

The beacon reward grant, an unringfenced grant, is also something that has been used, again at the discretion of the beacon, to recognise the role their partners have played – for instance by rewarding voluntary and community groups who have played a key role.

We will consider further advice from the Panel and other stakeholders on how to recognise the role of partners.

C3: The selection of Beacon themes should:

- continue to reflect cross-cutting as well as service-specific areas
- include sufficient themes to align directly with each of the shared priorities between central and local government
- continue to focus on those areas that directly produce tangible outcomes for customers and communities. This may also include 'back-office' or corporate subjects where appropriate
- be of interest to a wide range of authorities of all types, sizes, and locations

Local authorities have a key role in ensuring that local people have the best possible quality of life. Everything authorities do impacts on the people living within their areas, from collecting rubbish to looking after the more vulnerable members of society. Authorities need to provide or procure, the best possible services for everybody in the most efficient and effective way.

It is therefore important that themes reflect the wide range of roles that authorities undertake but that are issues which local people consider important. The selection of themes underpins the Beacon Scheme.

When the scheme began themes were service specific but in response to changing priorities have expanded to include cross-cutting and more corporate subjects as well. The important principle behind the themes must remain however that they make a tangible difference to local communities. In addition, many of the themes, rightly, align with the shared priorities of local and central government.

The Government therefore accepts this recommendation which formalises the types of themes that are selected each year.

C4: The core criteria against which all applications are assessed should be changed to:

- Leadership: Vision and Strategy
- Actions
- Community and Customer Engagement
- Partnerships
- Equality and Diversity
- Outcomes

with the proviso that additional, flexible criteria can be applied to reflect the particular issues relevant to each theme.

The selection criteria are an important part of the assessment process. The current six-point model has been used since Round 3 whilst the environment local government works within has changed. The Government accepts these recommendations to change the selection criteria, but would like the Panel to monitor how effective the changes have been and to advise on whether they should be altered for future rounds.

C5: The timing of the application and assessment cycle of the Beacon Council Scheme be amended to make the Scheme more accessible and user friendly.

The Government recognises that the current beacon timetable is demanding both for applicants, assessors and Government departments. The increased role the IDeA take in the scheme has allowed this timetable to be extended. The Government therefore broadly accepts the Panel's recommendation to make the beacon timetable more user friendly. Some adjustments will be made to the Round 7 timetable and efforts will be made to launch the Round 8 application brochure before the local government elections in 2006.

C6: A specific Beacon Council Scheme website should be developed with links to other relevant sites such as ODPM, IDeA, Improvement Network etc.

The Government will discuss with IDeA the possibility of taking forward this recommendation. However, site statistics show that the Beacon Scheme sections of the IDeA website are one of the most frequently accessed part of the IDeA's website.

C7: The IDeA should actively investigate the options for sponsorship of the Beacon Council Scheme and for more active promotion of the award ceremony and other Beacon events.

The Government recognises that sponsorship offers possibilities for more active promotion of the scheme, however it also poses a number of difficulties and potential conflicts of interest. ODPM are currently working with IDeA to investigate the option for sponsorship but are also looking for additional ways to promote the various events associated with the scheme.

ANNEX A

Review of the ODPM Beacon Council Scheme

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Advisory Panel for Beacon Councils is requested by Nick Raynsford, Minister for Local Government, to undertake a comprehensive review of the Beacon Council Scheme and make recommendations on how the Scheme can continue to contribute to the Government's modernisation and improvement agenda, and in particular how the scheme can:

- make a greater impact on improving service delivery
- increase efficiency and
- build capacity in Local Government.

The review should take into account value for money, in particular, in relation to recommendations to develop the scheme.

The Panel is requested to report recommendations of the review to ODPM and Ministers, following a wide consultation to include local authorities and key stakeholders, drawing on evidence from the ongoing research on the scheme undertaken by The Local Government Centre, University of Warwick.

The Panel is requested to consider the following:

- The overall 'vision', aims, and objectives for the scheme.
- Themes – to consider the selection of themes and the current timing of announcement.
- Selection – to consider existing arrangements for selecting Beacons including the selection criteria and the assessment process.
- Dissemination – to consider the effectiveness of the existing dissemination activities as carried out by the Beacon Councils, supported by the IDeA.
- Other related issues – including the effectiveness of associated documents and best practice publications. To also consider timescales associated with the scheme, the extent of participation in the scheme as well as the role and involvement of key stakeholders.

- Awareness of the Scheme – to consider methods and target audiences to maximise awareness of the scheme and to ensure that it is promoted widely.

To enable recommendations from the review to be incorporated into Round 7 of the scheme as appropriate, the Panel's findings and recommendations are requested by 1st March 2005.

The objectives of the Review:

- To look at the roles, activities and selection of the specialist and core panel members and in particular to look at the role of the panel in the assessment and application process
- To assess the reputation of the panel
- To complement and feed into the wider review being undertaken by the Panel on the ways in which the scheme can be enhanced
- To make recommendations on the way in which the work of the panel could be improved
- To provide advice on how to enhance the Beacons scheme

ANNEX B

Review of the Panel

Aim: To provide advice and recommendations to Ministers about the role and work of the Beacons Advisory Panel Council programme.

OBJECTIVES

- To look at the roles, activities and selection of the specialist and core panel members and in particular to look at the role of the panel in the assessment and application process
- To assess the reputation of the panel
- To complement and feed into the wider review being undertaken by the Panel on the ways in which the scheme can be enhanced
- To make recommendations on the way in which the work of the panel could be improved
- To provide advice on how to enhance the Beacon scheme

ANNEX C

Membership of the Panel 2005

CORE MEMBERS

Marianne Hood (Chair)

Independent Adviser and Housing Consultant

Clive Grace (Deputy Chair)

Director-General, Audit Commission Wales

Dr Mohammed P Aslam

Chief Executive of Worcestershire Racial Equality Council

Angela Cornforth

Councillor, London Borough of Greenwich

Mark Greenburgh

Solicitor, Wragge & co

Olu Olasode

Public Service Productivity and Strategic Finance Consultant

Linda Phipps

Independent Consultant on Local Government Improvement

Neil Wightman

Local Government Officer, London Borough of Camden

Alan Woods

Chief Executive of ENCAMS

Final member of the Advisory Panel due to be appointed in the Summer 2005.

