



Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister

Creating sustainable communities

*Long-term evaluation of
the Beacon Scheme:
Time 1 Case Studies
Overview Report*



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January 2006

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The findings and recommendations in this report are those of the consultant authors and do not necessarily represent the views or proposed policies of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

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January 2006

Product code: 05 LGFG 03574/3

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1. Introduction

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Improvement and Development Agency have jointly commissioned the Local Government Centre (LGC) at Warwick Business School to undertake a three to five year evaluation of the Beacon Scheme (BS). The aims of the research are to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the scheme for local authorities (whether as Beacons or as attendees of learning events).

The research consists of secondary data analysis, surveys of elected members, officers and front-line staff perceptions as well as case studies. Four Round 5 Beacon themes have been selected for in-depth study. These themes are Benefits Administration, Early Years and Childcare, Better Local Public Transport, and Crime and Disorder Partnerships. Within the first phase of case study research thirteen authorities were selected. Seven of these authorities attained Beacon status in Round 5 within one of the above themes. Six case study authorities did not achieve Beacon status in Round 5 ('non-Beacon') through not applying or applying and being unsuccessful but they had expressed an interest in learning, improvement and innovation within the particular themes.

The case study research has several aims:

- To explore the 'journey' to becoming a Beacon and the possible impacts of all stages of being a Beacon council.
- To assess the learning that authorities gain through the Beacon Scheme and other learning opportunities.
- To increase understanding of the processes that enable learning within and across authorities.
- To examine improvement of service performance.
- To examine the impact of the Beacon Scheme upon different authorities.
- To explore perceptions and attitudes to the Scheme.

The councils studied included a variety of different authority types from across England with varying geographical and socio-economic contexts and different Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) scores. This enabled an exploration of the varied impacts of the Beacon Scheme. The following tables classify the case study authorities by CPA score, region, political control and authority type:

CPA Score	Beacon Authorities (No.)	Non-Beacon Authorities (No.)
Weak	1	1
Fair	3	2
Good	2	3
Excellent	1	0

Region	Case study Authorities (No.)
North West	4
Yorkshire and Humber	1
East Midlands	1
West Midlands	2
London	2
South East	1
South West	2

Political Control	Case study Authorities (No.)
Labour	8
Liberal Democrat	2
No overall control	3

Authority Type	Case study Authorities (No.)
Metropolitan District	4
London Borough	2
Unitary	4
District	2
County	1

Across the Beacon and non-Beacon case study authorities, experience with the Beacon Scheme spans from an authority that has applied only once as part of a joint application to an authority that has applied over ten times.

There is a good range amongst the Beacons themselves. Amongst the Round 5 Beacon councils there were two with a history of consistent and multiple applications to the scheme. One had submitted thirteen applications over the five rounds of the scheme and the other had applied nine times. Two of the Beacon authorities had never applied prior to Round 5.

Across the non-Beacon authorities, only one reported that it had never submitted an application to the Scheme. Upon database investigation however, it was established that the authority had been part of a joint application, although had not been directly involved in the process.

Across the seven Round 5 Beacon case studies, a total of 43 applications to the scheme had been made over the five rounds. Across the six non-Beacon case studies, a total of 12 applications had been made.

The case study interviews were carried out from July 2004 to March 2005. At each authority four to six in-depth interviews were carried out with members, officers and representatives of partner organisations. The perceptions of interviewees in the case study authorities were analysed and combined with Beacon Scheme application data and secondary data such as inspection reports, to produce an individual research report on each authority.

A thorough and transparent process of analysis and interpretation was conducted across all thirteen case study reports (Radnor, 2005), resulting in a full comparative and thematic report, an overview document and a brief summary document.

2. The Beacon Scheme

When the Warwick research team conducted the first round of case study interviews, the Round 5 Beacon authorities had only just commenced their Beacon year, with its accompanying responsibilities for dissemination activities. The initial thoughts and perceptions at this early stage were captured, and can be augmented with knowledge of the various dissemination activities over the year but it will not be until the second time series of longitudinal studies have been carried out that a full picture will develop.

2.1 Rationale for Involvement

There are broadly three reasons for the submission of applications highlighted through our case studies: to reward and recognise staff for their achievements; to promote the service and the council as a whole; and to drive improvement.

“gives the staff something to aim for and a sense of pride when they win this sort of thing” (Elected member, Beacon)

“within my (service area) we positively set out to improve how we sold ourselves” (Officer, Beacon)

“We believe in what we do... quite visionary.... a passion... the opportunity to do that on a wider stage and to learn from other people and to connect with other people... [it is] good for (authority name)” (Officer, Beacon)

Explicit ‘reputation management’ strategies were exhibited by some of the authorities, with the Beacon award perceived as a tool in this approach,

“council is very keen for putting itself forward for everything and anything it can” (Officer, Beacon).

Some regarded raising the profile of the service and the council as a way of gaining influence and support, financial or otherwise, both internally and externally in relation to central government.

Boosting employee morale and improving reputation were explicitly identified by interviewees as motivations behind submitting applications, but the desire to drive improvement was sometimes a little vaguer. Some saw the Scheme as an opportunity to underline cultural change, to provide opportunities for mutual learning and to provide a focus for performance, but it was unclear whether these were factors that originally motivated an application or whether they were benefits they were now hoping to realise. The desire to *“connect with other people”* (Officer, Beacon) was strong amongst both the Beacon and non-Beacon interviewees.

For a number of authorities, timing was a key factor in the decision to apply. Interviewees suggested that it was felt that authorities had a story worth telling and were concerned that if they did not seize an opportunity to apply in a particular theme, then due to the annual change of themes, they might not get another chance.

2.2 Rationale for Non-involvement

To understand why authorities did not apply to the Beacon Scheme it was useful to explore case studies with little or no involvement with the Scheme. Key elements that emerged included resource constraints, in particular due to the raft of other initiatives on the modernisation agenda.

“A good service becomes a poor service because everyone’s managing Beacons” (Officer, non-Beacon) and *“No-one is going to criticise the concept of [Beacons] I don’t think, it’s just the work level really”* (Elected member, non-Beacon).

Timing was raised as an issue, in that authorities felt that they wanted to wait until their corporate and/ or service performance was of a level to apply ‘safely’. That is, some authorities did not want to apply until they believed they had a good chance of success and sufficient allocation of the resources required for the application process and if, successful, the dissemination process. In addition, authorities indicated that they did not apply due to a sense that they would gain little from the award,

“I never know what these Beacon Schemes are meant to do for us”
(Elected member, Beacon).

The breadth of awards available for authorities to apply for means there are many other initiatives that may be applied for, for example, Local Government Chronicle and Municipal Journal awards. Some authorities expressed no interest in gaining awards, believing that improvement and recognition could be achieved through other means, such as networking and attracting the attention of central government through good practice. The issue of genuine, tangible outcomes was an important one for interviewees: a scheme needs to offer a clear incentive to get them involved and for some the learning and improvement benefits were seen to be not tangible or genuine enough.

“If I’m going to convince corporate directors that doing Beacon is a good use of their time and/ or visiting Beacons is a good use of their time, I need something more tangible in terms of demonstrating how it can improve... that’s very difficult”
(Officer, non-Beacon)

Other potential barriers to applications that were identified included a lack of awareness of the Beacon Scheme and the concern about the impact of failure on morale. Cynicism towards the Scheme could also negatively impact applications. The belief was expressed that the *“usual suspects”* (Officer, Beacon) tended to gain awards; similarly, another Officer described the distribution of awards as possibly a *“geometric share-out depending on type of authority, geographical location”* (Officer, non-Beacon).

2.3 The Application Process

A number of key drivers and enablers of the application process are identified through the case studies. The significance of elected member and senior management support was highlighted explicitly by some interviewees and implicitly through exploring aspects of successful or unsuccessful bids. An integrated approach to submitting an application, incorporating service-level involvement, corporate assistance and political support could be regarded as the most successful formula for an application. This was underlined by the feeling in one non-Beacon that lack of authority-wide support had contributed to the failure of a bid:

“[We had] Support from members but no practical support. It was recognised internally that we had improved and that we were doing things differently and everybody was supporting us but in the end nobody did anything. That was the problem. When we weren’t short-listed it wasn’t mentioned again and I think the authority let themselves down” (Officer, non-Beacon)

Partner involvement, especially at the assessment visit stage was also identified as essential. The role of key individuals in driving a bid was strongly emphasised due to both strategic and practical implications in gathering data from across various organizations and departments and getting the buy-in of other employees. Additionally, previous expertise facilitated the process for one authority though the lack of previous expertise was not an insurmountable barrier as two Beacon authorities had never applied to the Scheme before. An interesting enabler was the alignment of council or service priorities with Beacon themes. For example one authority’s corporate objectives included creating a ‘cleaner, greener, safer’ borough, which they thought a particular Beacon theme supported. Along with timing this was a practical facilitator in decision-making about applications, helping to generate political and managerial support for a bid.

2.4 Beacon Status

A range of positive and negative aspects of Beacon status were raised across the interviews. These were broadly in-line with the rationale for involvement or non-involvement. Recognition and improved reputation were clear benefits, with interviewees perceiving or actually experiencing greater influence internally within the authority and beyond within regional and national forums.

“Raising the profile gets the members interested, gets their support for changes that we’re putting through and will help us hopefully to influence some future government policies or at least get involved in those sorts of things” (Officer, Beacon).

“Getting awards is one of the only ways of showing the council that we’re doing our job properly” (Officer, non-Beacon).

The power of Beacon status to improve the reputation of a council, even where the authority as a whole struggled with poor image, was cited as a major positive effect. Interviewees hoped that improved reputation could impact upon public perception of service quality, although reservations were also expressed about how much impact one award could have upon public perceptions. Some interviewees gave evidence of situations where senior staff from Beacon authorities were increasingly involved with central government policy meetings.

“Beacon status does open doors to becoming involved in national groups and influencing the national agenda” (Officer, Beacon).

It must be noted here that there were also interviewees from non-Beacon authorities who similarly reported attracting attention from and gaining influence within the national agenda due to achievements entirely separate from the Beacon Scheme. The external validation was reported to boost morale and have a positive impact upon staff in the award-winning service area. This was evidenced in part by the enthusiasm expressed by the Beacon interviewees.

“It is in part Beacon status which makes people enthusiastic and committed and want to play a major role in the way the organisation performs” (Officer, Beacon)

“Beacons are about motivation for the staff and celebrating individual success”
(Officer, Beacon).

The external recognition sought from central government was reinforced across the Beacon authorities by internal recognition from senior management and politicians and from across other services, and regional recognition from other local authorities and agencies. One district authority expressed disappointment that they had not received any congratulations from their regional government office or county council.

Although the desire for improvement was not as clearly emphasised as a rationale for putting forward a bid, it appears that it is recognised as a positive outcome from gaining Beacon Status for several reasons. The ways in which Beacon status is perceived as generating improvement varied. It could serve to underline desirable organisational change and to lend credibility to improvement initiatives, supporting them in being driven through an organisation. One authority that had undertaken radical innovations in one service area perceived that Beacon status could help them to disseminate the benefits of this approach *internally*.

The process of making an application and receiving feedback was outlined as a positive reflective process encouraging review and evaluation of activities,

“I don’t think any of us realised just how far we’d come and how much we’d done until we had to sit down and put it on paper. I think it’s rewarded us for being innovative. We like to say that we embrace change, we don’t wait for change to come, we go looking for it...it’s all reinforcing the kind of culture we’re trying to develop” (Officer, Beacon)

“In doing the bid you reflect on what you’ve done, you reflect on the improvements you’ve made, you start gathering evidence. Spreading it around the authority it will encourage other services to become more open and innovative.” (Officer, Beacon)

Beacon status also can provide extensive opportunities for personal development of staff through both attendance and presentation at learning events, something that a number of the authorities hoped to capitalise on. Interviewees pointed out that both the application process and the achievement of Beacon status could be seen as a challenge to improvement. Obtaining a Beacon award is a challenge, but once obtained it serves as a challenge to other services within the award-winning authority to achieve the award themselves and also by placing the winning service on a ‘pedestal’ it challenges them to maintain this success,

“If you’ve got Beacon status you can’t afford to sit back and say this is what we’ve got, we carry on the same way- you’ve got then to say, “How can we improve on this so we can get Beacon status again?” (Elected member, Beacon)

Finally, learning and improvement could take place through one of the explicit aims of the Scheme: to promote benchmarking and good practice transfer. Authorities expressed a willingness to learn from other Beacons and non-Beacons. The opportunity to learn and transfer knowledge through the Scheme is explored later in more detail.

“... if we are only interested in the “badge” then short listing is not bad but in terms of working with others and the sorts of things we could do – bringing people here and giving us a chance to work with people... [winning the award would be better].”
(Officer, non-Beacon)

“We do a good job and can give others opportunities to learn from us... and it is an opportunity for us to pinch ideas from other authorities” (Officer, Beacon).

“It’s also about developing ourselves. Gives us the opportunity to go to other places, have contact with other authorities who are doing the same thing... a great benefit” (Officer, Beacon).

Another positive aspect to Beacon status is the possible impact upon partnerships. Although the Beacon services already had good partnership relationships there was some evidence that they sought further improvement. A commercial partner to a two-time Beacon service suggested that the award shows that the council is committed to innovation and improvement and that it also focuses the service on these aims. Interestingly, another partner agency felt that the award reflected well on them and showed them in a positive light, despite Beacon being limited to a Best Value authority award. This positive light, the interviewee felt, helped her with her job in the community. Similarly other partner agencies were using the Beacon logo on their literature and promoting their relationship with their partner council,

“they (partners) feel that it is recognition for them as much as it is for the council” (Officer, Beacon).

Although it was early days in the authorities’ ‘Beacon Year’, it was indicated that partners would be involved in joint dissemination activities alongside the Beacon councils.

Negative aspects of Beacon status centred primarily around resource implications and organisational issues. Authorities were concerned about the financial cost of dissemination events plus the human resource considerations of having individuals taking time away from the ‘day job’,

“The very thing that we won the Beacon for was being let down because we were too busy going round telling people how we won the award” (Elected member, Beacon).

Organisationally, interviewees felt that the relationship between Beacon councils and the IDeA required better management with regard to the balance between support and guidance for and empowerment of the authorities (see below). Finally, interviewees expressed concern over their authority being held up as a Beacon of good practice, fearing the unrealistic expectations that this label may create. The negative impacts upon morale and resources arising from a failed application were raised;

“The drawback is if people don’t make it, the feeling of disappointment and the time and effort which go into putting this together. It doesn’t do people good” (Officer, Beacon).

2.5 Interviewee Recommendations for the Scheme

A number of recommendations were made by the authorities for the improvement of the Scheme. These can be categorised as relating to the role of the IDeA; learning and improvement opportunities; timing; and linkages with other aspects of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda. A number of interviewees felt that the IDeA at times was too prescriptive in its approach to dissemination and that the authority should have more influence over the approach and the practicalities. This must be balanced with positive feedback on the work of the IDeA, including support from theme co-ordinators in the initial stages of receiving the award. Additionally, some interviewees expressed a desire for more opportunities for communication and contact between the Beacons themselves so they could

learn about how other authorities were approaching dissemination. Comments about the overall scope of the Scheme included whether it could encompass partners rather than being exclusively for Best Value authorities.

“Morally, why shouldn’t the police, health, the county have a Beacon? It would be nice to have Beacon status for partnership” (Officer, non-Beacon).

The desire was expressed for further mutual learning with central government, with the Scheme having a more proactive approach reflecting local government priorities rather than reacting to central government demands. Finally, there were comments that the themes could be even wider and announced on a longer time-span to reflect corporate organisational issues.

Interviewees questioned what they saw as the over-simple model of learning and knowledge-transfer underlying the Scheme, pointing out that actually taking ideas from different contexts and applying them is a complex activity. Therefore there is a need for recognition of this complexity. Beacon Councils on the whole present a story of outcomes developed after the improvements; interviewees suggested that hearing about the mistakes and understanding the processes along the way to these outcomes can be useful.

“I don’t feel that there is anything that went wrong – once they empowered the staff and made all the changes everything was marvellous and it’s that unreality – what happens when things go wrong? How do you deal with things that change? How do you deal with the initiative that went pear-shaped?... We would like to know the horror stories” (Officer, non-Beacon)

The sustainability of Beacon initiatives was raised with interviewees suggesting that initiatives are tracked over time to truly assess their success, or Beacon funding to be increased to a longer time period,

“What I’d like to see... is for the initiative to be established as something that should be done by everybody and for the government to recognise that and perhaps help authorities to fund it” (Beacon).

3. Learning

3.1 Learning and the Beacon Scheme

Interviewees from all the thirteen authorities reported engagement with a wide range of internal and external learning activities. Non-Beacon authorities appeared to be as engaged in external learning as Beacons. Regarding learning through the Beacon Scheme some examples were given of adapting good practice witnessed at dissemination events,

“We were able to tap into their best practice... and that specifically helped us to refine our thinking in terms of what we set up to tackle that problem” (Officer, non-Beacon)

On the whole, although interviewees spoke positively about Beacon events there were generally few examples given of events attended or actual learning transferred. Interviewees confused Beacon events with other conferences and spoke of attending a range of other sector-specific activities. A couple of interviewees explicitly stated that they would go through other mechanisms to access good practice rather than attend Beacon events,

“Would I use the list of Beacons if I wanted to learn something about performance management and see who was good at X then probably not...I would use other means-our Audit Commission relationship manager...CPA scores...national contacts I've got...the LGA” (Officer, non-Beacon)

It is clear that in a busy agenda with numerous other learning events and improvement tools available for authorities, the Beacon Scheme, although recognised as valuable, is not always clearly distinguished and differentiated and is seen as just one of a number of avenues to gain learning.

There was evidence that involvement with the Scheme as a Beacon authority, rather than as a 'learner' authority could potentially generate more learning opportunities. Certainly the Beacon authorities were keen to derive learning from other authorities and interviewees welcomed the fact that Beacon status requires them to actively engage in a number of events throughout the year. One interviewee explicitly stated that being a Beacon council generates a sharing, learning mentality. This perspective was supported enthusiastically by a number of Beacon interviewees for learning and networking through the Scheme.

Whilst numerous interviewees expressed a belief in the efficacy of taking good ideas from others, there were those who questioned the concept of knowledge-transfer through sharing good practice.

“[There is] a gap in sharing practices, tools and techniques as opposed to us all sharing successes and achievements which is a very different focus” (Officer, non-Beacon).

An example was given of a knowledge-transfer failure between a Beacon and a non-Beacon. There was a degree of cynicism expressed by some interviewees about the success stories presented by Beacons. One interesting contrast of perceptions was between a new Beacon council that felt that its achievement of the award lent the Scheme kudos and weight as they were not *“one of the usual suspects”* (Officer, Beacon), whereas another non-Beacon authority indicated a high level of scepticism over the same council's Beacon “front”,

“I feel (Authority name) is very much a front – not that it is not there but there’s this very big back end and its all rosy and its got this band wagon and yet back in the office is it really that rosy all the time?” (Officer, non-Beacon)

This cynicism may reflect tensions between local authorities, inter-authority perceptions of reputation and reactions to central government policy, which may in turn limit openness to learning. However, stories of success may run the risk of over-simplifying what was probably a complex and convoluted process of change. Do the Beacon authorities fully understand how they achieved their success? It may be more useful for ‘learner’ authorities to understand the milestones achieved on the way to these outcomes.

Engagement in mutual learning opportunities with other councils was something that a number of interviewees raised as desirable, and that many were actively involved in. Whilst interviewees from Beacon authorities regarded the Scheme as an opportunity for mutual learning, both from other Beacon and ‘learner’ councils, one interviewee from a non-Beacon authority held a very different view of the ‘Beacon-learner’ relationship;

“Some of the learning on performance management is going to be less going to listen but working with people who are at the same stage as us – mutual learning. I would put that in a slightly different category as going to a Beacon day” (Officer, non-Beacon).

3.2 Preferred Learning Processes

Preferred learning processes and activities varied across interviewees, indicating the importance of a wide variety of diverse opportunities, through the Beacon Scheme and beyond,

“[A number of authorities] have come along and asked ‘Can you work with us over a period of time and mentor us?...and at the other extreme, people just want to pick things off you that can be quite easily shaped and put in their authority name”
(Officer, Beacon)

Interviewees emphasised that an important element of learning relationships was engaging and interacting with people. Successful learning relationships were presented where authorities formed a close link over time, sharing details of their own experiences – and mistakes,

“learning exchanges and open days are the best way to learn as interaction is very important and this can’t be done with the web or emails” (Officer, Beacon)

Interviewees cited a range of different sources of learning, broadly categorised as networks, partners, central government, community, other authorities, and a range of internally and jointly organised activities. Networking, it appears, is an important source of inter-organisational learning for interviewees. A broad range of networks were engaged in, including regional, service-related, professional, local partnership networks, and national and European. Working with and learning from partners were inter-related network activities across all of the case study authorities. Although some specific partnership learning events were described, in general interviewees suggested that they learnt from partners through their on-going and established partnership activities. Learning from other local authorities was widely supported as an important source of learning, notwithstanding reservations about the difficulty of knowledge and good practice transfer. Often learning took the form of sharing practical ideas and recommendations, particularly amongst front-line and partner interviewees. Senior officers and heads of service expressed an interest in seeing how other authorities

were dealing with changing policy agendas and meeting with people facing the same challenges. These interviewees reported that they took a collaborative approach, desiring to learn *with* other authorities.

“There may be a greater role that local authorities can play for one another”
(Officer, Beacon)

“It is a challenge and learning from the experience of others is clearly important”
(Officer, Beacon)

“I’m encouraging my staff to go and talk to other staff in other boroughs about all of their work. I do think you can learn a lot from other boroughs” (Officer, non-Beacon).

Whilst some interviewees emphasised the importance of forming learning relationships with similar authorities, the majority indicated that they felt they could learn from a range of different councils,

“I think we can learn a lot more from each other. I wanted to get rid of this myth about what category you’re in” (Officer, non-Beacon)

“Even though they may be poor or weak, I’m sure there will be things that they are doing that we can take because everybody’s good at something” (Officer, Beacon).

3.3 Elected Members and Learning Events

On the whole, although aware of opportunities such as Beacon events, elected members did not appear to attend as many learning events as officers, Beacon or otherwise, which reflects, perhaps, their workloads and responsibilities. Elected members connected with the Beacon services did express an interest in being involved in learning events and had already, for the most part, played a significant role in the Beacon application process.

4. Improvement

4.1 Improvement and the Beacon Scheme

There was a range of opinion regarding the degree to which the Beacon Scheme leads to improvement or reflects and rewards improvement already made.

Some interviewees agreed that the Beacon Scheme supports improvement and acts as a spur to continuous development, although it is only one tool amongst many;

“No one tool fits all; it’s a variety of tools that we can use to really enhance learning and development to sustain improvements” (Officer, non-Beacon).

There was evidence of the Scheme being adopted as a corporate improvement tool by some authorities. This approach was used in relation to applying for the Scheme (as explored in Section 2.4: Beacon Status), by authorities using the application process to review services, where they encouraged an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of particular service according to the application criteria; and through using the Scheme as a way of accessing good practice in order to build capacity. One interviewee with extensive Beacon experience proposed using the Scheme as a strategic tool by linking council objectives to Beacon themes and bringing people together to work around a common agenda, believing that aiming for Beacon status can both inspire and challenge,

“more challenge of their working around that agenda than on a day-to-day basis” (Officer, non-Beacon)

A number of Beacon authorities also suggested that having Beacon status helps to underline and encourage culture change, reinforcing a desire to succeed, if not directly leading to improvement itself,

“It says to you, we’ve got to self-improve...we’ve got to learn from other people because we’ve got to live up to our reputation...fuels what you hope would be a desire anyway to learn from people...adds a bit more urgency” (Officer, Beacon)

The morale boost and the desire to continue to do well were cited as important in driving improvement. One authority believed that Beacon status provided credibility to some of its wider initiatives and helped to support staff from the service sharing their ideas with other departments, i.e. sharing good practice internally. Another way in which the Scheme could help drive improvement was suggested by interviewees: the kudos of Beacon status could help to leverage funding bids, which would lead to improved services.

“Raising the profile gets the members interested, gets their support for changes that we’re putting through and will help us hopefully to influence some future government policies or at least get involved in those sorts of things” (Officer, Beacon)

Additionally it may give the council more weight with other agencies when negotiating new initiatives. This type of benefit was seen as having influence internally, for example when presenting new initiatives to elected members, and also externally, to central government.

In general, the service improvement that led to achievement of a Beacon award was not seen to be a direct outcome of either applying for, or holding, Beacon status. That is, authorities

did not change their behaviour or performance in order to strive for Beacon status. Interviewees strongly expressed the view that their service was striving for excellence regardless of external awards and that the award had not induced particular behaviours,

“I can’t honestly say that having a Beacon has changed the way that we work”
(Officer, Beacon)

“When we start initiatives we don’t think ‘Great, this can get us an award’”
(Officer, Beacon)

“Progress hasn’t stopped... I’m sure it would’ve been done in any case” (Partner, Beacon)

The general perception held by the Beacon authorities was that the award rewards improvement that has already taken place and is recognition of this improvement, rather than an inducement for it. Interviewees pointed out that they had been achieving success with various initiatives, and in some cases had already achieved a level of recognition for them, when they applied for Beacon status. They did not alter their actions in order to win the award, although as mentioned above, supported the idea that the award can lead to *further* improvements.

4.2 Drivers and Enablers of Change and Improvement

A key catalyst for change identified by interviewees is the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and other external assessments. These assessments have driven the development of performance management systems in the authorities, which in turn have driven service improvement. Additionally, external assessment acted as a catalyst to engage in improvement activities beyond performance management systems, including engaging in learning partnerships with other authorities and establishing task groups to work on areas of weakness.

“CPA has been a catalyst to help us improve the performance of the organisation and how we manage the performance” (Officer, non-Beacon)

“[Self-assessment] made us realise, we can’t just go on accepting that we know this, we’ve got to do something to improve... Made us actually face our issues and do something about them” (Corporate Officer, non-Beacon)

“Now, if people aren’t doing a good job it’s recognised” (Beacon)

At the same time, cynicism and doubt about CPA was expressed,

“We still think it (the CPA methodology) is flawed, so Beacon is saying that you are good at something and that you’ve got something to tell people. That is why we have submitted now and it is quite different to what we were doing before” (Officer, non-Beacon).

Structural change was noted in the majority of case studies as having acted as an inducement for wider improvement. The scale of this change varied from transition to unitary status (seven years previously) and the associated upheaval and transformation to examples of business process re-engineering and establishing task-based work groups.

In addition to changes at a structural level, interviewees reported continuous development of processes, including mechanisms for improved communications, partnership working and

reporting. One area that seemed to be growing in significance was the development of human resources processes, including appraisal systems, to tie individual and group performance into the wider council improvement agenda.

Attempts were being made across the councils to alter the culture, aiming to create a performance focus. The success of these efforts appeared to be mixed. Whilst interviewees from Beacon authorities presented very positive accounts of their council culture, citing communication, member support and team-working as strengths, non-Beacon interviewees gave more mixed reports. Staff empowerment and close, informal working both internally and externally across partnerships were thought to be significant elements of successful, high performance services.

“I’ve always felt it’s a good organization, well supported politically, extremely good staff, really customer focused but it hasn’t been recognised and within my (service area) we positively set out to improve how we sold ourselves” (Officer, Beacon)

Commitment to change and improvement from elected members and senior staff was emphasised as a key factor in facilitating good working relations by partner interviewees. Similarly, the priority placed on a service area by the council as a whole, and its role in supporting authority-wide goals has implications for the support a service might receive for innovation and improvement. In a number of authorities it was suggested that senior elected members were important in leading and sustaining change, and there was evidence that the Beacon Scheme was widely supported by the members whose portfolio service had achieved Beacon status. Whilst it is impossible to discern whether this strong relationship was in existence prior to achieving Beacon status, it is clear that the associated elected members were very involved with their service.

Evidence of learning from partners and through close relationships with other local authorities and the impact of this on improvement was presented by interviewees. Transfer of ideas was evident, and usually led to adaptation of good practice from one authority or one situation to another. Interviewees referred to improvements as being amalgamations of ideas from elsewhere and of learning from the mistakes of others. There was evidence that ‘learning’ from others was sometimes seeking confirmation of an approach that they were planning to take anyway.

Partnership working was explicitly identified throughout the interviews as one of the most significant factors for authorities achieving improvement and generating innovative solutions.

“The work we’re doing with partners...we couldn’t deliver this service now without their involvement.” (Officer, Beacon)

Some common elements to being a good partner were: an inclusive approach; clear areas of responsibility; engagement of key decision-makers from the council in the partnership; and a commitment to performance.

“It’s great to see a council that wants to put things right and do things better than has been done in the past.” (Partner, Beacon)

All the case study authorities were engaged in initiatives to help deliver improvement. These initiatives varied substantially but can be broadly categorised as related to: partnerships; projects; organisational structures; organisational culture and communication; strategic or corporate goals; and community consultation.

5. Performance Management

The case study authorities had, to varying degrees, worked on implementing performance management (PM) systems. In some of the authorities, depending on who we spoke to, a different picture of the success of the management systems was given. Interviewees reported a range of future performance goals, from service-based to corporate, encompassing internal and external partnership working, statutory requirements and internal efficiency and improvement aims.

In relation to the results of improvement initiatives, the distinction between outputs and outcomes was frequently blurred with various initiatives presented as improvements, without evidence of the service improvement being demonstrated to us.

Interviewees reported a range of structured approaches to PM in their authorities and its utilisation to facilitate improvement. These approaches sought to link performance management throughout the whole of the council, from service objectives to corporate aims;

“Getting people involved in improvement activity that they may have never done before”
(Officer, non-Beacon).

Whilst there was a clear focus upon performance indicators across all the authorities with various mechanisms to ensure accountability for performance, there was also a movement from reactive performance measurement to more proactive management, as evidenced by the range of strategic, collaborative performance mechanisms being implemented. An example is the wide usage of Performance Management groups, both within and between authorities. The intention of these groups is to challenge service managers on their service performance and encourage a collaborative approach to problem-solving.

Only one authority explicitly linked the Beacon Scheme and performance management. This council had found the six headings in the Beacon application form very useful in guiding a service review and had adopted them as a basis for a review of all core services. Every service was to conduct an annual self-assessment against the Beacon application categories (such as partnerships and outcomes). This assessment would be challenged in a top management forum, which aimed to applaud strengths, identify gaps and help generate possible solutions. Interviewees from another, non-Beacon authority, spoke of using the Scheme as a tool to support improvement and of the possibility of linking authority goals with Beacon themes, although they had not yet put these ideas into practice. The majority of the case study councils did not directly consider or connect the Scheme and PM, either as ‘learners’ or as applicants, apart from utilising performance measurements such as performance indicators to support an application. Learning events were approached generally in an informal way, upon an ad hoc basis.

At a range of service levels it was reported that staff were aware of targets and were used to reporting on them. An issue raised by one front-line interviewee was that although he and his colleagues reported on issues, they were not involved in explaining them or generating solutions to problems, something he felt to be a barrier to improvement. Although interviewees on the whole were outcome-driven, referring to ambitious targets and meeting public demands, one interviewee from a non-Beacon authority suggested that rewards for milestones achieved on the way to outcomes would be a way to motivate managers. This interviewee accepted the need to focus on outcomes, but felt that managers sometimes struggled to provide evidence.

Regarding the mix between audit and award there was a range of views expressed. For some interviewees, awards such as the Beacon Scheme were regarded as something to pursue once bigger problems had been ‘put in order’ and assessments were deemed satisfactory; others viewed them as an alternative to external inspection and assessment and as a way of raising a poor profile. One assistant chief executive suggested that once an authority had structures in place to manage performance and was performing well, it would be possible to think about both award and audit together.

Interviewees from Beacon services reported that encouraging other departments to pursue the Beacon award and use the award as a tool in future improvement was an aspiration of the council.

“Other services will follow us. There’s going to be other bids and we’re going to help them.” (Officer, Beacon)

6. Key Findings and Implications for the Beacon Scheme

The analysis of the first set of case studies, conducted as part of the long term evaluation of the Beacon Scheme which uses a number of data collection tools, leads us to a number of findings about the Beacon Scheme and to learning and improvement more broadly. The case studies present a picture of council engagement with learning and improvement mechanisms, both internally and externally, across all the authorities involved in the case study set. There was a general consensus that the Beacon Scheme is a positive mechanism to reward and recognise services, and even individuals, within authorities as well as to help in sharing experience and learning from good and bad practice. However, the Beacon Scheme is often just seen as one tool utilised by councils, and whilst regarded as worthwhile to aim for and to attend associated events, it usually 'competes' with a host of other awards and programmes. Additionally, whilst services and authorities that have achieved Beacon status are clear about the benefits that the Scheme can provide, those with more limited involvement were less enthusiastic.

In terms of what non-Beacon councils gain from the Beacon Scheme, we can ascertain that whilst some engage with Beacon learning events, they are also attending a range of other conferences, events, networking forums and good practice sharing forums. Clear examples were given of useful ideas taken from Beacon authorities and adapted, but equally barriers to transferring good practice were also raised. The issue of resources arose repeatedly as a hurdle in attendance at events as well as engaging in the application process. For the majority of the case study the involvement of staff in regular professional or regional networks seemed to be a commonly cited source of sharing ideas and knowledge. Whilst Beacon authorities themselves anticipated gaining learning from the Scheme they were in the early stages of their 'Beacon year' and therefore could not provide much detail on this. It is hoped that by revisiting authorities and repeating interviews a year on it will be possible to address the question of learning, improvement and involvement within Beacon councils. It will also be important to visit other non-Beacon authorities to evaluate any changing attitudes towards the Scheme.

References

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