



**THE BENCHMARK
OF AN EFFECTIVE
DEMOCRATIC LOCAL AUTHORITY**
(‘The Leadership Benchmark’)

HOW TO USE THE BENCHMARK

This Benchmark will help local authorities become more effective. It will enable a local authority to assess its effectiveness in three of its main roles – leadership, service delivery and community participation. The authority will be able to compare its performance against the criteria of an ‘ideal’ local authority, set out in the Benchmark. The results will provide a baseline for an Improvement Plan that can be used by the participating local authority to drive up standards.

For the three roles, the Benchmark sets out 9 core competences. These describe what a local authority should be doing to carry out that role effectively.

In practice, local authorities are at different levels of performance, but each of them should be seeking to improve their performance to the levels of the best. The Benchmark therefore sets out a range of performance in each competence from Level 1 to Level 5. This allows the local authority to assess its level of performance in each competence.

For each competence, a local authority will exhibit indicators that may be positive or negative; a few examples of such indicators are provided. Indicators provide the evidence of performance, or level of competence. There are also some questions that can be used in interviews and workshops to elicit further evidence of performance in each competence.

It is possible for a local authority to apply the Benchmark to its performance through self-assessment; there are guidance and questionnaires available for that.

But a more powerful process is through a ‘Peer Review’. A local authority might like to invite an external ‘peer group’ (consisting of 3-4 trained senior elected representatives and officials from other local authorities) to help it assess its performance. This team can use the Benchmark to undertake a ‘peer review’ of the authority. This would make the assessment much more significant, and add a degree of objectivity; it would encourage local authorities to work together and learn from each other.

A visiting ‘peer group’ can use documents, workshops and interviews to gain a picture of the performance of a local authority, of its strengths and weaknesses, over a period of about 3 days. The group should discuss its draft findings with the leadership of the local authority and agree with them its recommendations for action.

It will be for the local authority itself to draw up an Improvement Plan to build upon its strengths, exploit any opportunities and improve performance in areas of weakness.

It would be the responsibility of the National Association of local authorities to manage a ‘Peer Review’ programme on behalf of those local authorities who wish to participate. The Council of Europe can offer expertise and a training manual in support of such a programme.

CORE ROLES AND COMPETENCIES OF AN EFFECTIVE LOCAL AUTHORITY

Role 1 Leadership

1 Vision and strategy

- Develops a realistic vision and a set of values in consultation with local people and organisations, balancing short and long term requirements.
- Develops and communicates policies and strategies, welcoming contributions from others.
- Leads by example, setting high standards of behaviour and performance.

2 People management

- Values all staff and elected members, and helps them to play a constructive role with proper support and resources.
- Applies effective personnel disciplines and promotes career opportunities.
- Devolves responsibility to managers where appropriate and supports innovation.

3 Communication

- Reaches out to all groups in the community, maintains dialogue and helps them become engaged with local government.
- Keeps elected members, staff and local people well-informed about its policies and performance, and consults them on its plans.
- Ensures all elected members are contactable and have the interests of local people at heart.

Role 2 Service delivery

1 *Planning and review*

- Has clear planning arrangements at community, corporate and service levels for both short and medium term.
- Demonstrates clear mechanisms for scrutinising the performance of local services.
- Reports clearly and in public on performance results and future plans.
- Consults elected members, staff and service users on the design of local services.

2 *Innovation and change*

- Challenges the status quo, and introduces new ideas and better ways of doing things.
- Seeks out good practice, disseminates lessons and provides learning opportunities.
- Uses project management effectively to introduce change and deliver specific goals.

3 *Service management*

- Manages services efficiently and effectively, in a way that delivers value for money, encourages staff to give of their best, and takes account of the views of service users.
- Uses objectives, priorities, performance indicators, standards and targets in all services to drive up performance, and monitors them regularly to inform policy and planning, and to demonstrate accountability.
- Compares its performance to the best in other authorities and sets targets for improvements.
- Carries out fundamental performance reviews of service provision in order to deliver real improvement.

4 *Resource management*

- Manages finance transparently to achieve maximum benefit, deliver value for money, and avoid unmanageable risk.
- Makes best use of assets.
- Ensures that resource management responds to the objectives and priorities of the local authority.

Role 3 Community engagement

1 *Citizen participation*

- Keeps citizens informed; requests, listens and responds to local views, and welcomes feedback on users' experience of services.
- Creates opportunities for local participation in the design and delivery of services.
- Develops neighbourhood bodies to ensure citizen participation in local decision-making.
- Encourages registration and voting.

2 *Alliance-building*

- Builds strong partnerships (eg for service delivery) with local organisations, with other tiers of Government.
- Creates opportunities for local organisations to contribute to effective local governance.
- Makes best use of international opportunities for cooperation.

Role 1: Leadership / Competence 1: Vision and strategy

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (vision, strategy)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
In consultation with all groups in the community, develops a realistic vision of the kind of community and local government that people want in the longer term, and develops practical strategies and longer term planning to achieve that vision.	- Has begun to define the vision, but with little consultation. - Some attempts to set out strategies, but planning tends to be short term and tactical.	- Has consulted / communicated vision internally and externally, but not much influence on service outcomes. - Explicit strategies developed (eg codes of conduct, training, links with other organisations etc), along with some (but not very effective) longer term planning.	- Widespread understanding of vision, reinforced by induction and training, with clear roles for staff and elected members (including the opposition) and mutual respect between them. - Strategies and longer term planning directly influencing policy and practice; active partnerships with local institutions; clear focus on making a difference for local people and resolving community issues.

Positive indicators: - good strategic plan available and used; - partner organisations / institutions fully engaged; - all parties have access to information, facilities, advice. Negative indicators: - poor communication; - certain community groups feeling excluded; - internal conflict, inappropriate conduct.	Key questions: <i>Does the leadership understand the meaning of good local government? What do local people think?</i> <i>Is the local authority clear about the main strategic issues?</i> <i>What are the arrangements for working with external partners? With what results?</i> <i>Does the local authority focus on peoples' needs (eg youth) and issues (eg housing)?</i> <i>Has the vision been translated into clear objectives, milestones, plans and targets?</i> <i>Do elected members (including the opposition) and staff work well together?</i>
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Role 1: Leadership / Competence 2: People management

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (leadership, roles, staff management, training)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Clearly values staff and elected members; generates commitment to the local authority internally and externally; manages staff effectively to ensure personal contribution to the successful achievement of the vision, policies and programmes.	• Leadership takes limited responsibility; weak personnel strategy. • Roles and responsibilities for staff and elected members unclear. • Staff management not seen as important by managers. • Training plans mainly on paper only. • Authority centralised.	• Leadership creates confidence, and works through personnel strategy. • Roles are clear and build on individuals' strengths. • Team work and management support is emphasised; staff are regularly consulted; promotion encouraged. • Full induction for members, and competency-based training and appraisal for all staff.	• Leadership inspires commitment and enthusiasm; personnel strategy has widespread support and leads to effective recruitment and retention. • Climate of cooperation and learning; good working arrangements between staff and elected members. • Good communications and team-working; innovation encouraged; achievement celebrated. • Strong personal motivation to improve; staff feel valued.

Positive indicators: - staff newsletters and communications vehicles; - effective training strategy; - low levels of sickness and absence, and good work discipline; - clear arrangements for recognising individual and team success and sharing good practice. Negative indicators: - the main source of information is unofficial; - staff openly critical of senior management and the organisation; - unhealthy, divisive, blame culture;	Key questions: <i>Are staff satisfied with their employment status? Is the local authority a good organisation to work for?</i> <i>Is there a staff appraisal scheme? Is it working well and do staff support it?</i> <i>Does the recruitment process attract the best people for the job? Do they stay?</i> <i>What arrangements are there for staff views to be communicated to senior management / elected members?</i> <i>Are staff committed to delivering high standards of service provision?</i> <i>Do staff have enough authority to manage their responsibilities well? Is this reflected in budget allocations?</i>
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Role 1: Leadership / Competence 3: Communication

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (range, internal and external communications)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Listens, encourages feedback and continuous dialogue with staff, elected members and all sections of the community; informs, convinces and influences, using a variety of communications channels appropriately; builds / uses networks through which to communicate; encourages community participation.	- Disseminates some information about the municipality; communication responsibilities unclear. - Senior managers do not really know what staff think. - Produces some information on specific services, but gets little feedback from service users.	- Communicates wide range of information through several channels; responsibilities clear. - Internal communication adequate and clear; staff and elected members understand policies and priorities. - Information on services / members available and clear; gets feedback from service users.	- Communication given strategic importance both internally and externally; timeliness, targeting and access managed well. - Senior staff and elected members seen as good communicators; training and expertise available; all staff involved. - Positive steps taken to engage local people, with special efforts directed to hard-to-reach groups (eg minorities, young people).

Positive indicators:

- examples of good communications;
- a corporate communications strategy;
- use of wide range of communications channels;
- mechanisms to engage with specific groups.

Negative indicators:

- poor relations with local media;
- leadership seen as poor communicators;
- communications mainly used to attract praise and minimise criticism;
- little communications on major issues.

Key questions:

Is there an annual report that puts in the public domain a clear account of performance and plans?
 Are staff and elected members aware of the need for good communications? Are they trained to communicate?
 Is there a well-publicised complaints procedure? How constructively is the information used?
 How do local people and organisations assess the communications of the local authority? Do they feel well informed?
 What are the key objectives of the communications strategy?

Role 2:Service delivery / Competence 1: Planning and review

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (process, outcome-focused, review-based)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Systematic planning arrangements that link vision and strategy with practical implementation / service provision; performance is subjected to rigorous review and uses results to inform planning.	• An annual planning process is short term and mainly a paper exercise, seen as responsibility of senior staff. • Internal planning starting to focus on improving service delivery. • Little effective review of performance.	• Planning covers short and medium term (3 years), and linked to financial and personnel planning. • Planning allocates responsibilities, indicators and targets. • Planning derives from aims and objectives, which are reviewed regularly.	• Planning is visible and active, engaging all elected members and staff, covering shorter and longer terms (up to 10 years), and integrated across service areas. • Planning linked to job descriptions and individual / team performance appraisal. • Evaluation regularly used to inform policies and plans.

Positive indicators: - plans are discussed regularly at team meetings and are visible through notice boards, IT systems etc; - plans are being achieved; - examples of services being improved as a result of review; - good community, corporate, service plans accessible. Negative indicators: - absence of planning or out-of-date / unrealistic plans; - excessive central control with managers uninvolved; - planning seen only as annual exercise; - elected members negative about performance review; - information restricted.	Key questions: <i>Are the local authority's aims and objectives clear to everyone?</i> <i>Are elected members and officers positive about planning and performance review?</i> <i>Is there evidence of plans being discussed in team meetings and committee meetings?</i> <i>How does monitoring, evaluation and performance review feed into future plans?</i> <i>Do all parts of the local authority contribute equally and enthusiastically?</i> <i>Do staff feel they work for a local authority that knows what it is trying to achieve?</i>
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Role 2: Service provision / Competence 2: Innovation and change

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (leadership, degree of pro-activity, examples of success)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Able to think and operate outside existing parameters, challenging the status quo and taking advantage of opportunities; welcomes and manages change in order to improve services.	- Leadership does not see need for change. - Is aware of new forms of local government, partnerships, management and service delivery. - Shows some attempts at planning and implementing change.	- Leadership communicates need for change among staff and elected members. - Actively encourages new approaches; encourages learning from elsewhere. - Can show several practical examples of innovation, and has a few pilot projects.	- Leadership demonstrates personal flexibility and willingness to change; reputation for innovation; asks people to contribute views about future. - Effective arrangements for evaluating new approaches, learning lessons and disseminating good practice. - Examples of innovation and evidence of learning widely identifiable.

Positive indicators: - seen as a centre of good practice and innovation; - new approaches to service provision and partnership working; - processes in place to support change; - many staff involved in implementing change. Negative indicators: - no, or few, examples of different approaches; - creativity discouraged; - little acceptance of change; status quo defended; - examples of change that were not sustained or had little effect.	Key questions: <i>How well known is the local authority for innovation? In what areas?</i> <i>Has the local authority undertaken performance reviews of service provision that brought about change?</i> <i>Does the local authority belong to benchmarking groups or best practice networks?</i> <i>Has the local authority really considered the changes implied by national legislation and policy?</i> <i>Is the local authority implementing sufficient change to achieve high standards of service delivery?</i> <i>Have major changes been recently introduced successfully?</i>
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Role 2: Service delivery / Competence 3: Service management

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (best practice, indicators, user engagement)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Actively seeks to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of service provision in a balanced way so that they better meet the needs of local people and community organisations; staff have the authority to fulfill their responsibilities well and are encouraged to give of their best; local people and organisations are consulted.	- Some ad hoc attempts to improve performance, but few indicators and targets; generally satisfied with status quo. - Staff not very motivated. - Views of service users have little influence on service delivery.	- Some improvements, but focus is more on process than outcomes; some joint working. - Manages performance with objectives, indicators, standards, targets. - Manages budgets well.	- Real drive to deliver high standards of service provision, seeking out best practice and comparing performance. - Performance information readily available; good project management; good use of IT; uses reviews to deliver improvement. - Outward-looking approach to citizens, users and potential users; local people actively engaged.

Positive indicators: - a clear suite of performance indicators, standards, targets used to drive performance; - various arrangements for citizen engagement; - reviews used to drive improvements; - some services provided jointly with other bodies. Negative indicators: - performance indicators and targets rarely used; - local views of services not taken into account; - widespread satisfaction with the status quo; - no external partnerships for service provision.	Key questions: <i>Do the performance indicators, standards and targets reflect user interests? How are they used to drive up standards?</i> <i>How does performance in key service areas compare with other local authorities?</i> <i>How effective are initiatives to encourage greater participation by local people in service provision?</i> <i>How far are services subject to fundamental performance reviews?</i> <i>How effectively are projects used to implement major initiatives? Is there sufficient project management expertise?</i> <i>Do local people have good access to information about services? How is IT used to provide performance information? Is there a constructive complaints procedure?</i>
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Role 2: Service delivery / Competence 4: Resource management

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (decentralisation, active management, consultation)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Actively manages all financial resources, facilities and assets to ensure maximum benefit, value for money and manageable risk; maximises capacity to achieve successful implementation of policies and programmes to meet the needs of service users and citizens; makes best use of systems and processes.	- Budget management is fully centralised. - Budgets are managed in line with regulations. - Local people are informed of the budget. - Staff do not have the resources to do the job properly.	- Some budget responsibilities with managers; some training. - Local taxes, fees, debt collection and property actively managed; some additional income generated. - Local people are consulted on the budget in advance.	- Managers / elected members actively develop budgets and manage assets / liabilities to meet service priorities; use IT systems effectively; implements best practice in financial management - Alternative sources of funding actively sought. - Staff and local people actively influence budgetary priorities.

Positive indicators: - integrated finance, personnel, service planning; - some devolved financial responsibility; - clear financial information / performance data; - up-to-date procedures. Negative indicators: - panic about resource or debt levels; - high levels of unit costs, poor comparative costs; - accountancy-driven approach; - property poorly managed.	Key questions: <i>Does the local authority have a reputation for good financial management? Is there good internal audit? How far does IT make financial information easily available? Is there a clear strategy for drawing up the budget? How much funding has the local authority attracted from alternative sources? Are there examples of significant cost saving through changed approaches? How does the local authority consult local people about financial matters? Are there examples of joint working with partner organisations that increase resources? What innovative use is local authority property put to?</i>
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Role 3: Community engagement / Competence 1: Citizen participation

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (elected members, attitudes, methods of engagement)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Understands the relationships required with all sections of the community; listen to views of service users and organisations to learn how to improve policies and performance; involves them actively in relevant decision-making; actively encourages voter registration and electoral turnout.	- Some elected members active in some areas. - Not really concerned about engaging local people; consultation seen as means of informing local people. - Only traditional methods used, eg public meetings.	- Most members trained and actively representing interests of local people. - Has strategy for encouraging involvement of local people; encourages electoral registration /voting. - Consultation ad hoc but some innovation; training available.	- Close contact between authority and all sections of community. - Culture of consulting and encouraging participation especially with hard-to-reach groups; high electoral turnout. - Wide range of techniques in use, especially promoting citizen participation in decision-making, eg through neighbourhood bodies.

Positive indicators: - examples of good, innovative participation; - mechanisms to support registration / voting; - special measures to engage minorities; - examples of resources and decision-making powers devolved to local communities. Negative indicators: - no sense of accountability to local people; - no surveys of public opinion; - elected members not visible in their community; - people disenchanted with local politics.	Key questions: <i>What mechanisms are used to engage local people?</i> <i>How does the local authority consult with specific groups (eg small businesses, minorities, youth)?</i> <i>What do people say about their experiences of being consulted?</i> <i>How are the results of consultation fed into the local authority's priorities, policies and plans?</i> <i>How open are committee meetings? Are decisions taken openly, or secretly in advance?</i> <i>Do councillors seek to maintain an exclusive role of speaking for local people, or do they encourage local people to speak for themselves?</i> <i>How far are local people involved in the solutions to the problems they face?</i>
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Role 3: Community engagement / Competence 2: Alliance-building

DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE:	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (communications, structures, awareness, outcome)		
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 5
Recognises the need to work with central government and local organisations to benefit the community; works in partnership with a number of bodies to initiate and implement policies and programmes jointly or in co-ordination; some international cooperation.	Communicates occasionally with other sectors (central government, NGOs, community organisations, private sector and other public sector institutions).	- Proactive approach to engaging with others sectors. - Structures in place to enable the different sectors to work together. - Awareness of how partnerships will impact on the structures and responsibilities of the local authority.	- Partnerships are producing positive outcomes; some partnerships international. - Sense of responsibility and sufficient expertise among staff and elected members for joint working. - Effective planning at community level with all sectors contributing; evidence of shared decision-making, shared resources, shared management.

Positive indicators: - a good, comprehensive plan for the community; - local forum / joint committees operating well; - shared strategies for key issues (eg health improvement, business development etc). Negative indicators: - few attempts to communicate with other sectors; - no obvious signs of partnership working; - some sections of the community excluded; - partnership arrangements seen as ‘talking shops’.	Key questions: <i>How well has the local authority engaged with central government, other public sector institutions, NGOs, the private sector and other community organisations?</i> <i>What is the level of its investment (effort, staff, finance, facilities, equipment) and expertise in partnership working?</i> <i>What is the level of investment by other sectors in working in partnership with the local authority?</i> <i>Are there successful examples of partnership working? What difference have they made in the community?</i> <i>Are there examples of pooled resources or integrated service delivery?</i>
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