



INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNMENT

VFM programme –Street cleaning follow-up

Oxford City Council

March 2009

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Report

Background

The street cleaning service costs approximately £2.8 million per year and employs around 70 front line operatives supported by a management structure which operates on an area basis and across the 'street scene' disciplines. There is an intensive service for the city centre and a programmed and tailored approach to the suburban and rural areas of the city.

Our report was considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 28 September 2007.

The key findings of our work were that, in our view, the service performed well and was improving its performance both in terms of citizen and stakeholder perceptions and in the important objective measure of street cleanliness - then BVPI 199a (now NI 195.) Resident satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness as measured by the BVPI general survey had risen and was above average for similar authorities. Members and residents regarded the service well and the departments which work closely with the street cleaning service were positive about their contribution to the environmental agenda and developing new initiatives.

On the other hand we believed that the management and administration overhead was above the average as a proportion of the costs of employing the direct workforce and saw this as an area for further work. We also proposed that the service developed information systems to ensure the capability to analyse and share data effectively and built on the collaborative work already being undertaken to ensure a seamless service at the front line.

Key issues raised in the report

In detail, our recommendations included that the service:

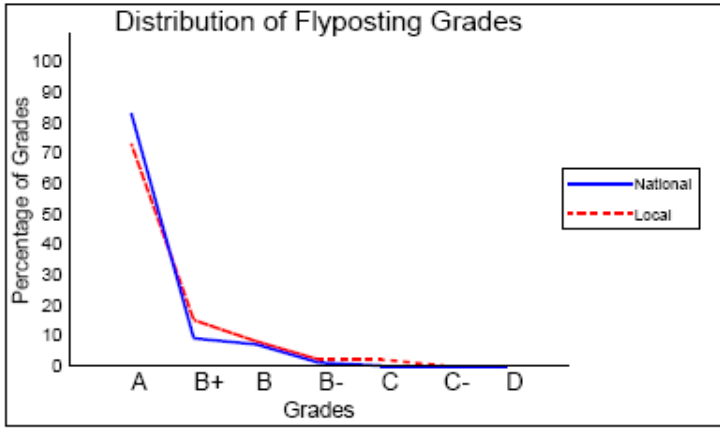
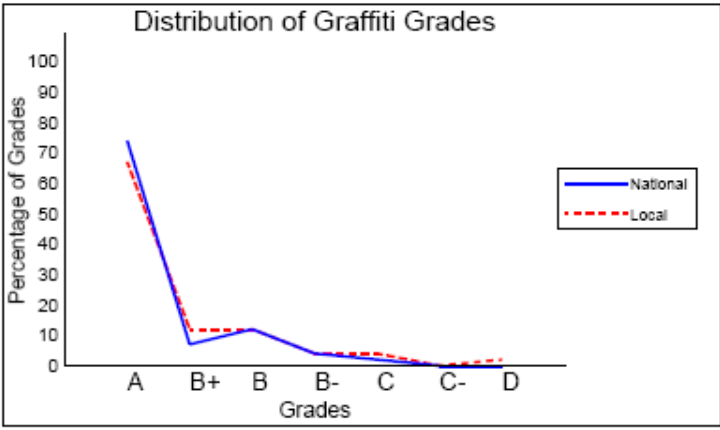
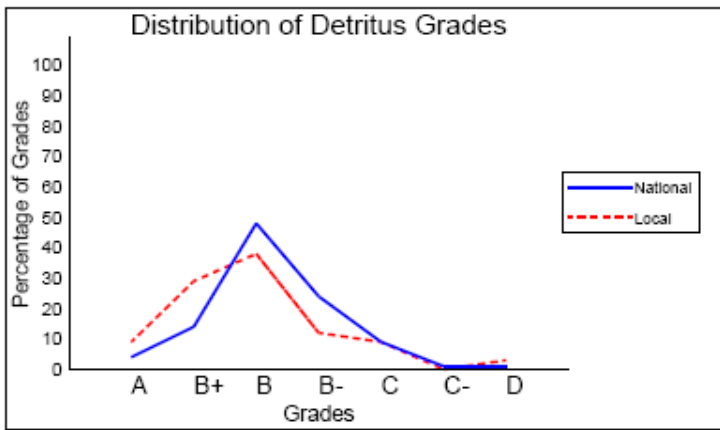
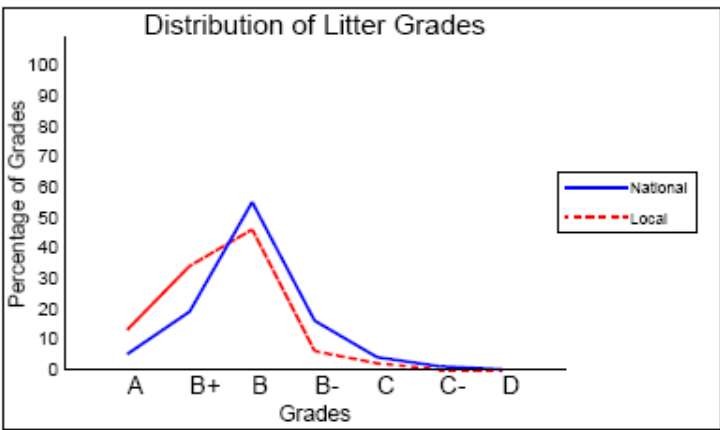
- gains a better understanding of its own cost base and use this to review the level of management/ administrative and transport/ equipment charges
- reviews the overall management structure
- seeks to undertake benchmarking through APSE and with a small networking group to explore the street scene issues faced by authorities with large visitor numbers
- moves to introduce hand held devices to support the inspection process
- reviews the decision not to charge for bulky waste. Such a review should be informed by the experience of other authorities which have introduced charges in the last 2/3 years
- reviews the indicators used in its performance management system and how performance information is presented, for example, to elected members and neighbourhood forums
- consolidates the joined-up approach with grounds maintenance and the moves towards integrated service delivery.

What actions did the Council take following the report?

- The Council has embarked on a significant restructure of the service which aims to rationalise the management and administration structures across the street scene services and make savings in the region of £0.5million.
- The restructure will also address the efficient use of front line staffing and equipment, ensuring a more joined up service across the street scene disciplines and getting better utilisation of equipment.
- The service has undertaken a number of benchmarking visits to other authorities and this has resulted in a number of service improvements, but the work on a detailed analysis of comparative service costs, particularly in relation to management and administration, is yet to be done.
- The introduction of hand held devices is going ahead – one has been introduced to support NI 195 inspections - but more slowly than had been hoped as the system because of delays in decision making in relation to the Council's corporate CRM system.
- Officers have asked members to review the decision not to charge for bulky waste and the political decision has been taken to retain the free service.
- The service has sought to broaden the indicators used in the performance management system and improve the presentation of performance information. Performance information is now presented to front-line staff and discussed in the appraisal process. The LAA indicators - NI 195 and 196 - are widely reported and Chairs of Area forums have been asked to identify additional indicators they would like reported in relation to street scene services.

Where is the service now?

Service performance on the key NI 195 indicators is provided by the DEFRA tables over the page which show Oxford City's performance in comparison to the national average for the first eight months of the 2008-09 year. This shows that, in general, Oxford's performance is skewed towards the left side of the charts, indicating better than average performance. This is particularly the case for litter and detritus, which are critical measures. It should also be noted that the comparisons show Oxford against all other councils, rather than limiting the comparisons to other city authorities.



Overall conclusion

We are pleased to report that the Council has responded positively to our observations and recommendations and that this has helped to maintain the improvement in street cleaning and its integration into wider environmental services.

There is still work to do in:

- Developing the benchmarking activity to ensure there is good comparative information on the costs of the service, particularly in relation to the management and administration overhead.
- Continuing the automation of data collection through the roll out of hand held devices.
- Further developing the performance management system.

The cost of the service remains high, and the Council may wish to consider whether it would be appropriate to market test at some stage in the future.

Acknowledgement

We would like to take this opportunity to thank your staff for their assistance and co-operation during this review.