



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 12 September 2012

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2012, Session 4

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

*John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Belinda Oldfield (Scottish Water)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David Cullum

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday 12 September 2012

[The Deputy Convener *opened the meeting at 10:48*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Deputy Convener (Kevin Stewart): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 19th meeting in 2012 of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. As usual, I ask everyone to ensure that they have switched off mobile phones and other electronic equipment, please.

I congratulate the former convener of the committee, Joe FitzPatrick MSP, on his appointment as Minister for Parliamentary Business. I am sure that we all wish him well in his new position.

Members: Hear, hear.

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 1 is to decide whether to take in private items 4 and 5. Under item 4, the committee will consider potential witnesses for our scrutiny of the draft 2013-14 budget, and under item 5, the committee will consider its approach to strand 3 of our public services reform and local government inquiry. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Town and Country Planning (Continuation in force of South Lanarkshire Local Plan) (Scotland) Order 2012 (SSI 2012/194)

10:49

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 2 is subordinate legislation. Scottish statutory instrument 2012/194 is not subject to parliamentary procedure, and the Subordinate Legislation Committee had no comments to make on it. Are members content to note the order?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: The clerk is telling me to welcome Jamie Hepburn as a substitute. Do you have any interests to declare, Jamie?

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): No.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

Public Services Reform and Local Government: Strand 2 (Benchmarking and Performance Measurement)

10:49

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 3 is an oral evidence session on the benchmarking system that Scottish Water operates. The session follows the seminar on local government benchmarking that the committee held on Monday. A recording of that seminar is now available on YouTube, no less. Somebody will have to teach me how to get on to YouTube.

I welcome Belinda Oldfield, who is regulation general manager with Scottish Water. Would you like to make some opening remarks, Ms Oldfield?

Belinda Oldfield (Scottish Water): Okay. Thank you very much for inviting Scottish Water to give evidence. Scottish Water has certainly learned a lot over the past 10 or 11 years with the advent of regulation and benchmarking, and we are keen to share what we have learned with other public authorities in Scotland.

Benchmarking was introduced when regulation was introduced, back in 2000-01. As I said in the short submission to the committee, it is fair to say that it was not entirely welcome, so we had challenges when it was first introduced. It is also fair to say that it was not well understood, and we had the added complexity that it was linked to our price control. It was very much about setting efficiency targets for Scottish Water, and the initial benchmarking information from the predecessor authorities was used to inform the efficiency targets.

Initially, we had no in-house capability, but we quickly rectified that over the first couple of years. We worked to understand benchmarking and were able to replicate it. A key point was to bring in the skills and capability to understand it. We moved away from running benchmarking with our traditional engineers' skill sets and recruited economists, statisticians and other more analytically capable people who would understand things much better.

Over the first four years, the importance to the business of the return of benchmarking information was very high. It was a huge challenge for us to switch quite a large national service organisation to examining its performance and delivering more efficient service improvements, but we found helpful techniques to do that, which I am happy to share with the committee. The Water Industry Commission for Scotland—which was the Water Industry Commissioner for Scotland—has

published benchmarking information annually. League tables and comments on our improving efficiency position have therefore been in the public domain for the past 10 or 11 years.

It is fair to say that, 10 or 11 years down the line, we are very supportive of benchmarking. We do quite a lot of internal and external benchmarking, and we also do international benchmarking. Last week, we hosted the Scandinavian 6-cities group, which benchmarks with us. We do a lot of benchmarking.

I am happy to take questions on areas of interest to the committee.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you very much.

The international aspect of benchmarking is interesting. How did Scottish Water and WICS develop data that are consistent with peers' data? What challenges and difficulties had to be overcome? We hear a lot in this game about comparing apples with oranges. How do you compare apples with apples?

Belinda Oldfield: We were quite fortunate in the water industry, as the Water Services Regulation Authority—Ofwat—developed benchmarking tools and techniques back in the late 1980s. Benchmarking tools were therefore available in England and Wales. Our biggest challenge in Scotland was that we had never done benchmarking before, and we did not necessarily collect information in a way that was consistent with how the benchmarking definitions required it to be collected. We had the added complexity that benchmarking had started with the three predecessor authorities, which had been merged into one authority. Therefore, we had three different ways of collecting information and three different interpretations of the definition of benchmarking.

One of our first challenges was to merge the first sets of information and try to make the information comparable. An organisation would collect information in a slightly different way, and it would not precisely fit the description in looking at whether the work was compliant. We had a job internally to bring together three different data sets.

The missing information was almost easier to deal with. We could establish that there was a gap that needed to be filled with information that fitted benchmarking descriptions. When information did not quite fit benchmarking descriptions it was a case of looking at how it was dealt with in other areas such as north Scotland, east Scotland or west Scotland and deciding which method was the most consistent with or most faithful to the benchmarking description and then teasing that out and merging all the data on to one definition. Gaps in information—and ensuring that the

information was precisely what was required—were the initial challenges.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Besides the existing benchmarking for the three organisations, did Scottish Water look for examples of good practice or benchmarking outside the water industry or in other countries?

Belinda Oldfield: We have been a party to international benchmarking for some time. We also supply information to an international benchmarking league table that is organised by Ofwat.

In the first few years, Scottish Water was very focused on the United Kingdom benchmarking system. We had to get that right and ensure that the organisation understood the importance of it. We used a lot of techniques to do that. It has been only in the past five or six years that international benchmarking—looking beyond the sector—has been as important for us, because the benchmarking tools are beginning to need to be reviewed and refreshed. Scottish Water is actively working with the regulator to do that.

James Dornan: You referred to initial resistance to benchmarking. How was that overcome and does any resistance remain?

Belinda Oldfield: As I said earlier, when we were given the results of the first set of benchmarking information we were initially asked to achieve 40 per cent efficiency reductions in our operating costs. That was quite a difficult concept for the senior management team. At that time they had not bought into benchmarking. We believed that in Scotland we were different.

We had to look beyond the organisation for opinions on whether the benchmarking could be replicated and whether it was giving us the correct information. We were very quickly able to understand that it was going in the right direction. There was not much about the benchmarking process to argue with. While our information was not perfect—it is still not perfect—benchmarking is high on the organisational agenda. It was showing us a direction to take. We became more focused. We were being asked to deliver quite big efficiency targets and the question was whether we were being asked to deliver them in too short a time. We switched our focus to the speed at which we were being asked to deliver efficiencies.

We quickly used our in-house capability to handle the benchmarking process. Over the first two to three years we began to build up a confidence in what benchmarking would tell us. We built up that confidence throughout the organisation. It proved a challenge to get the whole organisation to understand benchmarking and to have confidence that we were being asked to do the right thing.

James Dornan: Has the organisation now bought into benchmarking completely?

Belinda Oldfield: Absolutely. It is easy with hindsight. We are 10 or 11 years down the road. The benchmarking process was directionally correct and it has helped us to deliver huge improvements for customers such as cost efficiency and service improvements. There is no downside.

The Deputy Convener: Can we go a little further back in history? You talked about the three previous water authorities. I do not know whether you have the detail but, in the days when regional councils controlled water services, did benchmarking between those councils take place?

11:00

Belinda Oldfield: Not that I am aware of. I was part of Central Regional Council before the water authorities were established and I am certainly not aware of benchmarking having been done at that time, but I might be incorrect.

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): When you embark on adopting best practice, you identify new indicators as part of the benchmarking process. Indicators can become outdated or irrelevant. How does the review process work in practice? Are there difficulties in removing indicators and adding new indicators?

Belinda Oldfield: One of our key indicators is the overall performance assessment—OPA. That is a basket of 17 indicators that all add up to one number and that is fairly straightforward to follow. The components of that indicator change and have changed over time. In practice, we change them in discussion with regulators and other companies. As we see not that a measure is becoming redundant but that it no longer adds value, we can change components of the benchmarking. There has been evidence of that in the past five or six years across the UK.

John Pentland: In your relationship with the regulator, do you negotiate with that body or do you have to listen to it?

Belinda Oldfield: We now work with that body. Because of our business performance and the service improvements that we have made, the regulator is a lot more comfortable that we understand our business and are driving it in the right direction.

The discussions with the regulator are now much more informative. When we see a need to change direction and measure something differently or a benefit from doing that, the regulator is keen to listen. We are fortunate to have that relationship in Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: You have a number of regulators—four, in fact. They are the drinking water quality regulator for Scotland, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Waterwatch Scotland and the WICS. Is that correct?

Belinda Oldfield: Waterwatch Scotland is now Consumer Focus Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: Do you have to talk to all those people about changes to indicators?

Belinda Oldfield: Historically, we have not done that. Because the Water Industry Commission runs the benchmarking and because it is based on a UK-wide set of information, it has involved a bilateral conversation between us and the commission.

However, benchmarking is moving on even in the UK. We are in discussion with the DWQR, SEPA and the commission about adding a slightly different Scottish dimension to some of the work that we are doing. Historically, we have not involved our quality regulators or Consumer Focus, but that is—coincidentally—happening at the moment, as we are discussing changing benchmarking for the period from 2015 to 2020.

The Deputy Convener: Do those bodies talk to one another about changes to your indicators?

Belinda Oldfield: Yes. The commission has discussed with the drinking water quality regulator and SEPA the relevance of indicators, to ensure that they remain relevant. It would not be correct to chase benchmarking for the sake of it; benchmarking must deliver improvements.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): How are the outputs of benchmarking tools used in practice? Can Scottish Water give practical examples of changes that have been made as a result of the benchmarking data?

Belinda Oldfield: The two most significant examples that I can give concern cost efficiency and service improvement. We have driven quite a lot of efficiency through Scottish Water and have reduced our costs significantly. The improvement in our service is shown in the overall performance assessment. When we were first benchmarked with England and Wales, we were definitely in the lower quartile of the service indicator. At that point, we were very much a low-service, high-cost organisation. Over the past five or six years, however, we have moved that overall performance assessment right up into the top quartile, as is evident from the commission's published performance reports. We are now working towards—and we are pretty much at—being a high-service, low-cost organisation.

David Torrance: Can Scottish Water explain in more detail how “special factors” work in benchmarking?

Belinda Oldfield: Some of the benchmarking tools are quite complex, are not accurate and do not explain every organisation's particular set of circumstances. There is, therefore, a need for explanatory or special factors that explain a different set of circumstances. We have used those for all our operations in the north-west region, where we deliver the service to a much more remote population and incur more cost because we drive much longer distances in responding to customer service issues. We set about explaining that, with the ability to make an adjustment to some of the benchmarking models.

It is an area that we would be happy to talk to any of the local authorities about because it obviously impacts on costs. If we are operating in the central belt, that is all very nice, thank you, and in a city such as Aberdeen or Glasgow benchmarking is all very straightforward. However, if we are out in the Highlands and Islands we will need a set of special factors that describe a different operating environment.

The Deputy Convener: It might be useful for the committee to catch sight of one of those indicators along with the explanatory notes showing how you look at Aberdeen compared to the north-west Highlands or wherever it may be. If that could be sent to the committee, that would be very useful.

Belinda Oldfield: We can supply that.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): Are there still shortcomings in the Scottish Water benchmarking system? If so, how are they dealt with?

Belinda Oldfield: It is all relative. We certainly had shortcomings when we first started and even now the information is not perfect, as it is difficult to get perfect information. Are you asking how we overcame those challenges, or have I misunderstood your question?

Anne McTaggart: It was about the shortcomings in the Scottish Water benchmarking system. How are you dealing with them?

Belinda Oldfield: Sorry—I beg your pardon. In the early days, we had shortcomings in things such as data quality, so the organisation looked at the key parts of benchmarking. Quite a lot of benchmark information is asked for, and it is important to understand that some of that information is more important than the rest. It is a matter of trying to see the wood for the trees.

Initially, we sought out all the individual data providers in Scottish Water and ran workshops with those people. We ran simulations with them so that they could practise on the benchmarking models, make stupid mistakes and see what came out of the other end. We very much connected the

people at an operational level who were providing information and who were responsible for data quality with what came out of the other end of the benchmarking.

We instilled in our staff an awareness of the importance of data quality. The data quality was one of the shortcomings that you are looking for. There is still a journey with data quality to try to ensure that information that we deal with has the right confidence balance around it. That is a constant journey.

Anne McTaggart: Obviously, we have read about and you have spoken about Scottish Water's improvements in productivity. Were they down to benchmarking or were they a product of the merger of the three bodies?

Belinda Oldfield: They were down to a combination of both. The benchmarking told us exactly where Scottish Water lay in the league tables and what the efficiency gap was, but there were undoubtedly merger efficiencies. We did not need to have three head offices or three management teams. Efficiencies automatically came from going from three bodies to one body, but the benchmarking took us on that efficient service delivery journey by establishing what the efficiency gap was.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Belinda. The committee is interested in looking at benchmarking in general to see whether lessons can be learned for local government. From your experience at Scottish Water and with the benefit of hindsight, is there anything that you would have done differently in establishing the system?

Belinda Oldfield: If I were to do things differently, I think that it would be helpful to have greater clarity and understanding at the outset about why benchmarking is needed and what benefits it will deliver. I do not think that the conversations between the regulator and the predecessor authorities were full enough. The conversations became fuller when they were between the regulator and Scottish Water.

One of the initial challenges in bringing benchmarking into any service delivery environment lies in giving the people who have to be benchmarked a compelling argument about what the big benefits will be, trying to dispel the natural fears that come with it, and transforming the approach into big benefits.

I was struck by what was said when we hosted the Scandinavian countries last week. It is fair to say that we came to benchmarking because we were regulated. Five of the six Scandinavian cities are not regulated, but they had the foresight to see that benchmarking is important to delivering service efficiency, and they are doing it without a

regulatory mechanism or stick behind them. That was one of the things that struck me most.

With hindsight, I would have liked there to have been more conversation, more understanding up front, and more discussion with some of the senior management teams and the public. A reputational stimulus comes from benchmarking, as information is put into the public domain, and a league table will inevitably be produced. In the first instance, that league table may or may not be correct, as information will move over time, but it will start to rank which organisations are delivering more effectively and efficiently. We should all seek that for services in Scotland. We should not be concerned about the threat of being at the bottom of the league.

Margaret Mitchell: I will tease out the league table issues a little later. Basically, it is a matter of putting benchmarking in context and spending a lot of time up front selling it, on the presumption that one volunteer is worth 10 conscripts and that there will be a better chance of success if we take everybody with us.

On data collection and the use of benchmarking outputs, are there any lessons that you could pass on to other organisations about how the information was used?

Belinda Oldfield: Probably, although it is difficult to be specific, as I am not clear about the type of benchmarking that the local authorities might do.

Inevitably, it would be useful for the local authorities to have conversations with us about what we did and how we did it; how we overcame some of the data quality issues; how we got some ownership in the business from the people who own the key bits of operational information; and how we developed our own processes, controls and assurances around that information, a lot of which is signed off and goes to the Scottish Water board. We have done a lot to ensure quality benchmarking—going right up to the Scottish Water board—that I am happy to share with local authorities.

11:15

Margaret Mitchell: Was there an independent assessment of what you did in that process?

Belinda Oldfield: Yes, there was. We had what used to be called the reporter, who had a formal audit role for Scottish Water. He would come and audit us and all the information and would then report independently back to the commission. He would also report to our audit committee.

That reporter has been replaced by an independent assessor. The name has been changed, but the function is basically the same.

The independent assessor no longer audits our information for the commission, as the commission is content that our information has quality wrapped around it. However, we still ask the assessor to examine our information for our own governance arrangements. We still want to have in-built assurance that we can be happy with its quality. We do not want it to deteriorate.

Margaret Mitchell: So independent assessment was crucial at the beginning and, thereafter, is used as and when the organisation thinks that it would be helpful.

Belinda Oldfield: Yes. The added benefit of the independent scrutiny is that those individuals—the assessor is more than one person; it is a team of auditors—bring experience from other organisations to the task. Therefore, in conversation, they can tell us that one of the other organisations does something in a slightly different way that works better and is more effective. That means that we have an in-built learning and feedback loop that comes with the assessor services.

Margaret Mitchell: That is helpful.

I turn to the thorny question of league tables. You mention in your submission that they have been done in their current form for 10 or 11 years. I will ask the obvious question about public and press perception: was there any problem or adverse coverage and, if so, how was it handled?

Belinda Oldfield: We have certainly had adverse coverage over the years, although we do not have so much now. For our reputation, we do not want adverse coverage, so it creates added stimulus for more focus on improving services. It drives behaviour within the business. I am sure that if, when we had the bad press, we had been asked whether we saw the upside of it, we would have said that we did not. With the benefit of hindsight, I would say that, although it is not a place where we want to be, it drives the right behaviours in the business for ensuring that we create the service change that we need.

Margaret Mitchell: Was there a positive attempt to tell the press that you realised that you fell short of what you would like and would take steps to remedy it?

Belinda Oldfield: We have always been consistent about being aware of any shortcomings that are picked up and about being committed to service improvement and to providing the service more effectively and efficiently. We have always been positive about what we take out of bad press, but it provides the impetus for not wanting to be in that position year after year.

Margaret Mitchell: Convener, from the evidence that we have taken so far, it seems that

people are very wary of press coverage. It would be useful to get as much information as possible on good practice and how it was managed well.

The Deputy Convener: Indeed.

Jamie Hepburn: The purpose of a benchmarking exercise is to determine how Scottish Water is doing on a range of indicators by comparison to some of its peers—the other companies in the UK or, if the same indicators are used, the six Scandinavian cities that have been mentioned. That is useful, because it allows us and the public to see how Scottish Water is doing in comparison to other similar organisations. However, I imagine that it might be even more useful, certainly to the people whom I represent in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, to know how you are doing against the range of indicators in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth compared to how you are doing against those indicators in other parts of Scotland. Do you undertake that form of area-to-area benchmarking exercise in Scotland and, if so, how do you do it?

Belinda Oldfield: We do some internal area-to-area benchmarking. That starts to get difficult because of the regional boundaries and where the cut-offs are. This is perhaps adding a bit of technical complexity, but the treatment works at Loch Turret could be delivering water to Cumbernauld, when the operational boundary stops at Stirling. Therefore, it is sometimes tricky to give local benchmarking information and for that to be precise and accurate. It is much easier when the information is taken up to a higher level and we look at a whole country. We do some area benchmarking, but that is regional and changes over time because we change our operating areas, although that is for service reasons, not benchmarking ones.

Jamie Hepburn: So the areas that you use do not compare to Scottish Parliament constituency boundaries or local authority boundaries.

Belinda Oldfield: No.

Jamie Hepburn: That begs the question about how useful that information is. What areas do you use? Would people recognise them? Is that information useful only for internal purposes?

Belinda Oldfield: It is useful only for internal purposes at this stage. I am happy to have a think about whether there is merit in dropping down to other levels of detail. I can get back to you on that, but my initial reflection is that there is no merit in it. The lowest level that we drop down to is that of our current operational areas, such as the north-east and south-west. We find that regional and council boundaries change over time, so—

Jamie Hepburn: To be fair, they do not change that often. The most recent local government

reorganisation was in the mid-1990s, and before that it happened in the 1970s. We are not talking about something that happens regularly.

Belinda Oldfield: Possibly not, but keeping information at a high level enables us to process benchmark, which is a slightly different approach. It involves considering, for example, how a works in Aberdeen compares with one in Edinburgh. That operational information is important for us. I would need to think about what would be more helpful for customers in Cumbernauld, for example.

Jamie Hepburn: Your customers are our constituents, so that would be worth while.

Belinda Oldfield: Absolutely.

John Pentland: Scottish Water was established in 2002, but it was not until 2005-06 that there were annual savings of well over £100 million and, since then, the figure has improved. Between the establishment of Scottish Water and the years when a return was made, was there an on-going cost associated with the efforts to make savings? Were you spending money to get the return in the end? What was the cost of embarking on the benchmarking process?

Belinda Oldfield: The cost of embarking on the benchmarking process itself was pretty modest—it certainly was not material. Given the number of people who were involved, we probably did that for hundreds of thousands of pounds, and certainly not millions of pounds. In the price control, or financial settlement, that the water industry commissioner set for us for 2002 to 2006, he recognised that there was a necessity to spend money up front to deliver efficiencies down the line. That was called a spend-to-save allowance. An amount of money was allowed in the first price control to facilitate the delivery of efficiency savings.

The Deputy Convener: This is perhaps an unfair question, but will you say a bit more about the additional skills that, in your opinion, are required to allow local authorities to successfully introduce benchmarking?

Belinda Oldfield: That is not an unfair question. We were in the same situation ourselves. Our experience was that we needed to have much higher levels of analytical capability. We were being regulated, which had never happened to us before, so we needed regulatory economists, or what other people might call industrial economists, to help us through the whole sea of benchmarking and regulation.

As I said previously, we needed an increased number of statisticians because, for benchmarking, you require people who have a high level of statistical or mathematical capability.

You also need regulatory or industrial economists who look at organisations. Their skill set is that they can look at an organisation and see how it can deliver productivity gains. We did not have that skill set, because we were traditionally an organisation with engineering and accounting skill sets. That is not to decry engineers or accountants, but we needed to find the skills that would help us deliver the benefits.

John Pentland: When you agreed that benchmarking was the way forward, what was the timescale for the indicators being agreed and implemented?

Belinda Oldfield: There was a fairly short timescale, because the UK benchmarking system, which had been developed in England and Wales, was already in place. That system had been developed and we were asked to benchmark our information on that basis, so there was no transitional period. We were given the tables of information that were being requested and had to complete them.

It probably took us two or three years to move from that initial data return, which would not have been considered robust, to a position whereby the benchmarking was better, was better informed and was informing in the right direction. The quality of the benchmarking is now a lot higher; it is not perfect, but it is very different from how it was when we started. If I understand your question correctly, I assume that the local authorities have not yet agreed what their benchmarking looks like, because that system has not yet been constructed.

The Deputy Convener: As there are no other questions, I thank Ms Oldfield very much for her evidence. It has been extremely useful for the committee to hear about Scottish Water's experience. As agreed, we now move into private session.

11:28

Meeting continued in private until 12:02.

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