Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Local Government Benchmarking Framework Submissions

Introduction

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee undertake an examination of the development of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework every year. The framework was developed by the Improvement Service (IS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE Scotland), to assist Scottish local authorities to improve their delivery of public services.

The Committee issued a call for views in January 2016 (with a closing date of 12 February 2016) in order to canvas views on the framework. This is the second occasion on which the Committee has sought views on the benchmarking framework.

Views received

The views will inform members when the Committee takes evidence from IS and SOLACE Scotland on 24 February 2016 on the benchmarking framework.

The Committee asked the following questions—

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The Committee received a total of 20 views from public and local authorities. Those views can be found below.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Aberdeenshire Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

The LGBF is used regularly by the council to understand and support performance improvement.

For example, the Council's corporate Policy, Performance & Improvement Team alongside Service based performance officers undertake an analysis of the LGBF findings annually in the run up to the public release of the figures to inform the Council's Strategic Leadership Team and Elected Members. This analysis considers local performance in the context of the national picture and performance of comparator authorities. The analysis suggests where trends locally and nationally may be diverging and where further exploration of the benchmark data could support improvement actions.

The dataset is also used to support service reviews and options appraisal, providing managers with a baseline from which to explore similarities, differences and good practice with other councils to help identify alternative approaches for the organisation. For instance, one service used data from the LGBF to explore the relationship between service structures, public satisfaction and revenue costs and used the analysis to identify benchmarking partners to further explore potential structure arrangements.

In relation to self-assessment and evaluation at corporate and service level, the LGBF informs and evidences a core quality indicator – 'Improvements in performance' which in turn identifies other quality indicators within the 'How Good Is Our…' framework for further evaluation. Our self-assessment and evaluation at corporate level is an element of the evidence based underpinning the annual Shared Risk Assessment undertaken by the Local Area Network of external scrutiny bodies and at service level, self-assessment and evaluation informs for example the Quality and Standards report for Education & Children’s Services.

The council’s Scrutiny and Audit Committee have taken a keen interest in the subject of Benchmarking and the LGBF specifically. A report on Benchmarking was produced in 2013 (see http://aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/3795/benchmarkingdowehavethetoolsinplaceforeffectiveassessment.pdf) and the response to the recommendations are monitored periodically. On an annual basis a workshop is undertaken with the Scrutiny & Audit Committee to understand the LGBF and highlight improvement activity supported by benchmarking.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

Further to the response above, the data set is analysed and council performance compared against the national performance overall and by service area measured, by family group and to local neighbouring authorities. The council's position over time compared to other councils is also analysed alongside local performance over the longer term as the LGBF indicators are incorporated into the council's
performance management framework evidencing the delivery of the Council Plan 2013-2017 and aligned Service Plans. Through this approach Services use the LGBF data to determine improvement activity which is reported as part of the council’s Public Performance Reporting approach and is available on the website - see http://aberdeenshire.gov.uk/strategy-and-performance/about-performance/#howweperform. The September meeting of Aberdeenshire Council is predominantly focused on performance (the Council considers the Annual Performance Report, the Annual Audit Report, the Scrutiny & Audit Committee Annual Report as well as presentations from Policy Committees) and the LGBF data is incorporated into the session.

Performance data from the LGBF is available to officers and Elected Members via the council’s performance management system, Covalent, which allows Services to compare local performance data with the LGBF findings for the specific service area.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The LGBF makes an important contribution to supporting the council understand how it is performing overall and where and how improvements can be delivered to support performance, efficiencies and an improved customer experience. As such, we continue to support the LGBF and its development engaging in on-going discussion with the Improvement Service to ensure that the data collected is robust and the methodology for analysis and thresholds is accurate and fair, balancing the need to reflect local conditions with that of having a set of data which can be compared between different authorities.

However it must be recognised that there remain some challenges with the LGBF and it is the case that it is not the only or even primary tool used by some services in benchmarking and measuring performance comparatively. For example the National Planning Performance Framework remains the primary performance and comparative benchmarking driver for Planning Services and the APSE and SCOTS professional benchmarking clubs are proactively and extensively used by Services such as Roads, Transportation and Landscape Services who are members of these organisations. For Housing, the Scottish Housing Best Value Network, House Mark and now the Scottish Housing Regulator are the first point of call for benchmark data and subsequent benchmarking activity and the council has been active participants in these for several years.

For this council, a key strength of the LGBF is to bridge the gap where there is not an existing professional network, statutory or benchmarking framework. For example the council has benefited from participating in family groups in relation to the Culture and Leisure aspect of the LGBF.

The ability to manipulate the data and select different ways through the Spotfire portal and then presenting it against our own priorities is valuable. The way in which the data is themed does cause some practical issues for the council however it is recognised that every council has its own organisational structure and the LGBF is attempting to support this.

In terms of further development, there may be value in seeing if other datasets could be hosted in this portal, e.g. the National Planning Performance Framework.
One of the core benefits of the LGBF has been the delivery of the My Local Council Portal which is an excellent and accessible tool for the public to interrogate and hold their council to account. Further enhancement of this portal would be welcomed, for example the ability for users of the portal to link back into the council’s website for further information.

The timing of release of LGBF data continues to be a challenge although it is understood that the timings of underpinning datasets impacts. While, cumulatively the trends exhibited in the LGBF are very helpful and robust, it can be a challenge to persuade managers that the annual data is valuable when it appears to be almost 12 months out of date.

The Audit Scotland statutory direction tries to reflect the timing issues with the LGBF by effectively giving councils 12 months after the end of a reporting period to publically report performance. In reality it is not acceptable for residents to wait a full year to understand how their council is performing therefore Aberdeenshire Council prepares an annual performance report in September for the previous reporting period and updates it in the following March to reflect the LGBF and enable comparative data to be reported. Our ability to incorporate comparative performance data within the Management Commentary of the Statement of Accounts is also impacted by the release of LGBF data. Again, whilst we are aware of the challenges of obtaining the data and checking its robustness if there was a way of reducing the gap between the year end and the publication of data that would enhance the overall usefulness of the Framework.

There may be value in expanding the data included in the LGBF itself to reflect other core datasets currently missing from the LGBF (e.g. Development Services) however any addition to LGBF should continue the approach of utilising existing datasets and adding value through the encompassing of these datasets into a framework. It should not increase the burden of performance reports or data gathering for councils.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Angus Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

At Angus Council we use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) in one way or another throughout the year.

We participate in LGBF benchmarking Family Groups with other councils to explore the data and identify alternative approaches to service delivery which may bring benefits to Angus. Services covered include Museums, Equalities, Human Resources, Council Tax, Waste Management and Street Cleaning.

We upload benchmark data to our performance management system and also pass the full data to all services within the Council. Services use this data to evaluate how they are performing and identify other councils they may wish to engage with to explore potential improvements.

We prepare a report on all LGBF indicators based on the first release of draft data in the autumn. This reports our performance trend, performance against targets, the change in performance in the past year and the quartile and rank for each indicator. The report includes explanatory text provided by services and groups indicators by the degree of change from year-to-year. This highlights areas of greatest improvement and deterioration, the report also groups indicators by quartile. This report is considered by the Council Management Team and distributed to all services to help them to evaluate their performance and plan improvements.

We produce a focused report on two indicators for each meeting of the Council Management Team to enable detailed scrutiny. This report also includes performance trend data for all Scottish councils to enhance scrutiny.

We include all LGBF indicators in our Directorate Improvement Plans; this means they form an integral part of our planning process. As we produce annual reports on these plans they also form part of our reporting to elected members. The plans are scrutinised in depth at our Scrutiny and Audit committee.

Finally, we report benchmark data from the LGBF as part of compliance with our statutory duties of Public Performance Reporting and Statutory Performance Indicator. It is published on our website at www.angus.gov.uk/performance.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

As noted above, at Angus Council we use the framework to see how our local authority is performing by:

- actively participating in benchmarking Family Groups,
providing services with the data and challenging them to use it to improve,
reporting performance on all LGBF indicators to Council Management Team
where it is scrutinised,
producing focused reports on two LGBF indicators for each Council
Management Team meeting for in-depth challenge,
including all LGBF indicators in Directorate Improvement Plans and annual
reports on these plans, and
reporting LGBF indicators to the public to meet our statutory performance
indicator and public performance reporting duties

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make
use of the data in the Framework?

The LGBF indicator set has evolved since it was first introduced and we are
confident that it will continue to develop to reflect changes in legislation, technology,
service delivery and so on. There is a recognition that cost indicators need to be
balanced against outcome and quality indicators and that gaps in the framework
relative to the statutory duties and services delivery need to be addressed.

In specific areas of the framework we think that the Children’s Services area needs
to be significantly strengthened. We feel that there is too much emphasis on cost at
the nursery/primary stage without any indication of the outcomes councils achieve
from their spending. We would suggest replacing the existing attainment indicators
with two of the national benchmarking indicators used within the Insight tool:

- Percentage of leavers attaining literacy and numeracy, and
- Average total tariff score

We would suggest that the positive destinations be retained, including sustained
positive destinations and feel it would be useful to breakdown positive destinations
by SIMD and a measure of positive destinations for Looked After Children.

We think it would be worthwhile including indicators on attainment in deprived areas,
given the national emphasis on closing the attainment gap and would welcome
measures that demonstrates attainment at the Broad General Education stage.

We feel that the Children’s Services Social Work indicators are too focused on cost,
and the framework should include suitable outcome measures to provide context.
Such indicators should link with the National Improvement Framework, Insight and
Broad General Education indicators.

In more general terms, as a council we find the data easy to access and use to
assess our performance. This is in large part due to our understanding of the
challenges we face in delivering services in Angus and those faced by other
councils. Working with the data on an ongoing basis we also have the tools, skills,
knowledge and experience to make best use of it.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect the same level of understanding in members of the
public for whom the costs associated with rurality or the challenges of deprivation are
perhaps not commonly understood. For such users there is considerable contextual
information in the National Overview Report, however, there is scope for more
tailored explanations of performance to be added to the mylocalcouncil tool. Each
Scottish council faces specific challenges and pursues different priorities; we feel
that performance explanations for each indicator for each council are best able to
help the public interpret the data they are provided with. This approach is a key
element in our public performance reporting.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee – Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Dundee City Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

Generally Dundee uses the LGBF data once a year around this time.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

Dundee has accepted the Family Group drawn up by the Improvement Service as the main tool to drive forward improvement. Although use is made of the other Local Authority data the Family Group is considered the main performance driver.

The LGBF data is very helpful as it allows us to arrive at a number of savings scenarios which Chief Officers can discuss and direct service provision accordingly.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

We would like to see more comparison with Family Group members perhaps through adopting more performance indicators, perhaps by reviewing the Rating Return which we think could be used to good effect to make further efficiencies within Scottish councils.
East Ayrshire Council Response

East Ayrshire Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework, evidence of which will be presented to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee at its meeting on 24 February 2016 by the Improvement Service and SOLACE Scotland.

Prior to the establishment of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF), East Ayrshire Council had established a small cross council working group to examine costs and performance, the work of which has been previously recognised as good practice by Audit Scotland. The Council’s Corporate Accounting Manager, who led the cross council working group, has been an active member of the CIPFA Directors of Finance LGBF sub group that has advised and supported colleagues in the Improvement Service since the inception of the Framework.

The preparation and reporting of the LGBF data sets by the Council ensures compliance with the Accounts Commission Direction for Statutory Performance Indicators.

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

In East Ayrshire, the LGBF is used at various times over the year at corporate and service level in relation to service planning and delivery, preparation of Service Improvement Plans and to inform the Chief Executive’s Annual Performance Review Sessions with Heads of Service.

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework is reported annually to the Council’s Governance and Scrutiny Committee, following review and analysis of the LGBF data set and the National Overview Report published by the Improvement Service. This report is available to services and departments, and is publically available on the Council’s website.

The Council’s public website provides a link to the interactive mylocalcouncil.info site which allows Council employees and the public to access data and benchmarking information from all Scottish councils as required.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

East Ayrshire Council uses the LGBF as well as a wide range of other benchmarking data, including APSE, SCOTS, the Scottish Housing Charter, SLAED, etc., to identify and learn from those councils which are achieving the best performance in relation to service delivery.

The LGBF data is also used to inform service planning and review, the development of the Council’s Service Improvement Plans and the Chief Executive’s Performance Review Sessions with each Head of Service on an annual basis. This activity...
provides further and specific opportunities to focus on service efficiency and performance improvement.

The Council continues to participate in a range of LGBF ‘family groups’ across a number of service areas. Family groups based on factors such as population density and deprivation provide a structure for similar councils to drill-down into the benchmarking data and allow councils facing similar challenges to share learning and good practice, and work together to improve services.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

Expansion of the data sets: The Improvement Service has previously expressed its intention to work with councils and relevant partners to expand the data sets to cover gaps within the existing Framework. In this regard, expansion of the data to cover planning, homelessness, procurement practices, environment, transport and, in particular, business development, would be useful. However, in an already overpopulated landscape of performance measures, where possible the best use should be made of data already being collected when considering additional indicators.

Ongoing review and refinement of the LGBF: We welcome the actions highlighted in the National Overview Report 2014/15, which was issued on 29 January 2016, to be taken forward by the Improvement Service to strengthen the LGBF by working with councils and relevant partners to:

- develop a standardised and comparable approach to better understanding the development of children as they progress through pre-school and primary school in line with the development of the National Improvement Framework for Education;
- agree outcome measures for senior phase education, which reflect the whole range of measured achievement, building on the Curriculum for Excellence and aligning other measurement frameworks, for example INSIGHT;
- develop measures to support improvements in outcomes for older people and which reflect the complex changing landscape of Health and Social Care integration; and
- take forward the ongoing commitment to improve the measurement of customer satisfaction across local services.

Business development: Further work is also required to develop robust benchmarks to reflect the significant investment by councils in business development. The ‘employability’ measure on its own included in the existing LGBF does not fully monitor performance in this regard and the quality of the data underpinning this specific indicator requires improvement. The Improvement Service is aware of these issues and has highlighted its ongoing work with SLAED to address this matter.
Transformation change: It will be important that the Framework keeps pace with the scale, range and complexity of transformation change which is being experienced by local authorities and across the wider public sector in Scotland and which has become day to day business, most notably:

- Health and Social Care integration;
- Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014;
- Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015;
- community asset transfer; and
- environmental sustainability.

The current approach may be regarded as slow in reacting to change and there is a need to review the LGBF and to establish a method where improved performance and savings achieved by councils through transformation can be identified, showcased and shared.

Community Planning: In addition, with regard to the wider Community Planning reform agenda, it will be important to explore with local government and a range of partners, opportunities for support and development of more partnership focused frameworks, linked to Local Outcome Agreements.

External comparisons: In terms of how councils could achieve added value from the LGBF approach, consideration could also be given to broadening external comparisons to include information from outwith Scotland as this has potential to identify further effective performance against a lower spend.

Family Groups: The Council is involved in supporting the family group activity across a range of services. However, other than sharing some of the output from this activity on the Knowledge Hub and ad hoc meetings to consider and discuss progress on family group activity, there currently is insufficient structured feedback across councils providing opportunities to share good practice and learn from each other. It would be helpful if the good practice emerging from the collaborative work being taken forward through the ‘family group’ process could be consolidated into an annual report, perhaps as a supplement to the National Overview Report, for circulation to all councils to inform local improvement activity, service review and service planning processes.

Length of time to publication: An ongoing concern, of elected members as well as officers, is the time lag in publication the LGBF data (in January each year), comprising data from the previous financial year. The data would be more useful if published closer to the reporting period to provide a more relevant focus for performance improvement.

Comparability: East Ayrshire Council continues to have concerns regarding the comparability of the data presented within the Framework and that consistency is not applied across services and all local authorities. This includes the lack of clarity within the guidance provided by the Improvement Service associated with the LGBF indicator set. This was highlighted in the audit work of the 2014/15 indicators carried out by the Council’s Internal Audit. Issues were identified and clarification had to be sought from the Improvement Service in relation to three of the four indicators sampled, where definitions provided were regarded as open to interpretation. It is
essential to ensure comparability and the guidance associated with the LGBF indicators requires to provide more detailed definitions and address points of clarification.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

City of Edinburgh Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

City of Edinburgh Council regularly uses the framework as part of our own performance framework management.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

It uses the Benchmarking Framework as part of ongoing monitoring and reporting to both elected members and senior officers. The annual data is used to create overview reports for specific themes and comparison with all Local Authorities. Examples of our 2013/14 reports can be found here. The 2014/15 overview report will be available on the website in March 2016.

The Family Group work was also extremely beneficial in terms of sharing best practice and we continue to work with our key partners.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The data currently meets our needs.

Our driver now is to seek out best practice within the group and within the wider UK framework as we develop the transformation programme for the City on particular themes and share knowledge and expertise.
Fife Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

LGBF Indicators have been incorporated into Fife’s Performance Management System, and included in Service performance scorecards as a matter of routine.

The annual LGBF Indicators are part of the analytical dataset used by Services to assist them with budget savings, transformational changes and service redesign.

Fife’s position on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework is reviewed on an annual basis when comparative data for all Councils is published.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

As part of routine monitoring of service performance to management teams, and reporting to elected members, for example, via regular service reports to Scrutiny Committees.

To report to the public on performance on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework, via Fife Direct - Benchmarking (SPI 3) and to explain reasons for variation in performance

Produce an annual quartile report to provide an overview of Fife’s position on the LGBF indicator set, which is made available to the public.

Produce an annual Benchmarking and Family Group Comparison report which enables managers to see how Fife compares to other Councils, and its family group comparator Councils, on each indicator. This includes short and long trends and what level of performance would be required to be in the top quartile.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

It is not necessarily further data that is required, but a continued refinement of the indicator set to include those indicators that are most useful and meaningful at a local level.
Glasgow City Council Response

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) has been introduced successfully under the direction of SOLACE and with the support of the Improvement Service. It appears to be well regarded by Audit Scotland and the Framework has been well received by Glasgow’s elected members. It provides a suite of information which is useful for Public Performance Reporting and for identifying where there appears to be significant cost or service differentials that make benchmarking worthwhile.

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

The Council’s Corporate Management Team reviews the LGBF annually when the final data is released by the Improvement Service. It is presented to both the Operational Delivery Scrutiny Committee (ODSC) and the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Committee (FASC) for their consideration as it contains indicators relevant to service delivery and value for money.

The Council then participates in a number of the national benchmarking groups throughout the year to consider the issues raised within the LGBF and to identify best practice alongside authorities with similar characteristics. It is in these groups that we undertake detailed benchmarking of the headline service areas included in the LGBF.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

The Council uses the data to compare its performance, customer satisfaction and costs to other councils in Scotland, particularly those in our benchmarking family groups. The data now spans several years and allows for trend comparisons to be made. Elected members find this trend information particularly useful. When the LGBF is presented to the Corporate Management Team and to elected members, it contains both information on trends over time and the performance of comparator family group authorities.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The LGBF incorporates a number of indicators that were previously prescribed by Audit Scotland as Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) and they were subject to routine re-evaluation and assessment. Responsibility for the maintenance of these indicators has now passed to the Improvement Service.

In the development of the LGBF to date, some of the former SPIs were incorporated as they were, others have been modified on an ad hoc basis, whilst others would benefit from review. The development of a transparent and systematic approach to reviewing the former SPIs would ensure that these indicators remain relevant to the local government community and fit for the purpose.
The other indicators used in the LGBF (that were not formerly SPIs) are generally derived from sources that are “Official Statistics” and as such are subject to the quality processes present within National Records of Scotland (NRS) or the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This means that as long as the most up to date national indicators are used that the accuracy and validity of these indicators is assured.

The LGBF would benefit from a period of stability and review with any development of the framework focussing on approaches that would make the information easily accessible and readily understood by elected members and the public.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Anne Harrow Response

Please find a response to the consultation for the Local Government Benchmarking Framework. I am a member of Loreburn Community Council which is in Dumfries and Galloway. However, the most recent discussions were undertaken as a member of the public (My CC was suspended due to elections and therefore there has been no opportunity to discuss this most recent consultation with them.) Therefore the views and comments below are mine alone and should not be attributed to Loreburn Community Council. I have copied the Chair of the Loreburn CC into this email.

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

At the moment our Community Council do not use the framework at all. It is my understanding that the Benchmarking Framework is not used within the wider community and there is no opportunity to use the Framework as a means of discussion or challenge with respect to performance. I have now communicated a desire for my local Council to use community groups and Community Councils as "critical friends". I hope that from this point forward Council Officers and Elected Members will use the Framework to discuss service performance and improvement with a wider audience.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

The framework is not widely recognised or known. Therefore members of the public and interested community groups are not able to discuss how they might review Council performance.

I became aware of the Framework in early 2015 following a consultation undertaken by the Local Government Regeneration Committee. As I am a member of my local Community Council we subsequently sought information from Elected Members with respect to Council Performance, we also sought to identify how Elected Members and officers seek feedback and in particular how the Benchmarking framework is used and integrated within service plans. It is my understanding that at this moment in time there is no external consultation with the wider community in relation to performance review or indeed to the evaluation of service outcomes. I understand that the PI's within the Framework are embedded within my Councils service plans

I have sought to identify how Community Councils or groups might be used as "critical friends" with respect to performance review. I would hope that following discussions with Council Officers there will be more opportunities for Community Councils and other interested Community Groups and/or Citizens Panels to become more engaged (consulted) when evaluating or reviewing appropriate performance criteria. I have highlighted the need to provide training for those who are invited to evaluate or review performance. I have also suggested different consultation methodologies which would support consultation and engagement.
3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The Framework is not widely publicised and therefore not easily identified as a benchmarking tool.

With respect to what further data would be helpful may I suggest that service users are asked for their views with respect to what Performance Indicators realistically inform service improvement. What is defined as a useful performance measure by Officers and or Elected Members may not always be recognised as the most Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic outcome for communities. Service improvement may therefore not be easily identified or indeed acknowledged. In order to identify how Councils seek external feedback from Community Groups or Citizen Panels it may be useful to factor this approach when defining future performance information.

As many towns are working towards re-generation it would be useful to ensure that there is a “joined up” approach to identifying suitable performance criteria which would support improvement and encourage best practice to be shared.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Highland Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

The LGBF is an annual set of performance measures and the Council has integrated the LGBF into its annual public performance reporting. The LGBF represents an important strand of Statutory Performance Reporting which is contained within the Accounts Commission’s Direction on publication of information in compliance with the Local Government Act 1992. The Council is engaged in on-going work with the IS to develop and improve the usefulness of the framework.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

The Council uses the LGBF information to inform the Council, Strategic Committees, our partners and stakeholders including the public of our performance trends and benchmark position. An important part of this approach is to identify and progress appropriate improvement activity. This included engaging with other authorities where the LGBF has indicated there may be opportunities to share best practice or create other learning opportunities.

The Highland Council’s approach has been to embed benchmarking within improvement, scrutiny and public reporting activity as outline above. Without providing detailed comment on individual indicators (already submitted to IS via working groups) there are a range of reasons why the LGBF presents a too simplistic picture of performance which is also influenced by individual Council structures, geographies, service delivery models and political priorities.

It is anticipated that use of the data will be integrated into the approach to Best Value reviews of Council’s in the future. Further clarity and guidance is needed on the role of LGBF within Best Value reviews.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

In moving going forward the framework must add value and support Council’s to not only evidence their performance but plan improvement activity that has an impact on improved outcomes for stakeholders. This is particularly important linked to the approach to the next round of Best Value reviews recently outlined by the Accounts Commission.

It will become increasingly important that the financial context in which the framework is developing is recognised and therefore how the framework might further support continuous improvement and efficiency. The data also provides a focus for improvement activity based on local trends in the LGBF as opposed to benchmark positions where these are less relevant. It needs to recognised (as
indicated above) that the structure, geography and service delivery priorities of local authorities in Scotland are widely varied and this affects outcomes and benchmark positions in ways that need more complex analysis than viewing top quartile positions as positive and bottom ones as areas for improvement.

Highland Council staff are currently involved in the national working group and in the family groups both of which are important to ensuring the widest possible input to the development of the LGBF, identifying data and indicators that will be most useful going forward. The Council has therefore committed to supporting the IS for a further 2 years to support the on-going development of the framework.
Moray Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

Reporting to the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee and Service Committee is undertaken annually following publication of national results.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

National and family comparator data against all indicators is extracted, provided to services and reported on.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

More recently on a visit by the Improvement Service to discuss CPP benchmarking, an issue raised was awareness of national targets across council Services and the advantage of having these presented alongside data, this would improve transparency of performance levels against national targets.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

North Ayrshire Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) is a central component of our improvement journey. The LGBF is a regular source of reference in terms of our performance management and reporting. Performance Reports including the LGBF indicators are reported to and discussed, six monthly, with the Extended Corporate Management Team and Cabinet.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

We have worked across the Council to identify those indicators which are of particular significance and priority to use. We then detail plans for how we are going to enhance performance in these areas. Having a benchmark allows us to identify high performing Councils in these areas. This allows us to investigate how best practice is improved elsewhere. The Framework also allows us to assess progress made from improvements undertaken.

We are involved in leading and supporting family group activity. Comparing similar councils ensures that the benchmarking is more relevant, meaningful and robust. Good practice is highlighted and shared on the Knowledge Hub.

We report annually to Cabinet and Council on the LGBF report after it is published. This is followed up with a report that focuses on our improvement activity in our priority areas. The published data is shared throughout the Council’s Directorates.

Our public website contains information on the background to the LGBF and we provide narrative on any work that has taken place in LGBF indicator areas. We also link our public website to the interactive mylocalcouncil.info site. This allows the public to access data and benchmarks from all councils.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

There are a number of areas of potential improvement in the Framework itself. Many of these have already been highlighted to the Improvement Service through the development priorities for 2015/16. We would also highlight the following:

Development of indicators.
Annual reviews should continue to keep cognisance with the level of change in Scotland. In particular the changing environment and legislation – such as community empowerment, asset transfers, Children’s Act, early years, integration of health and social care services, environmental sustainability etc. Development of further economic development indicators would be particularly useful.
Opportunities to share and discuss good practice.

It is important that the learning is shared as effectively as possible across all councils. Consideration of a dedicated Family Group newsletter/update outlining key outputs/contacts may be helpful. The regular blog and newsletter has been helpful in keeping up to date with wider Framework developments.

Delay in publication. Perhaps one of the main areas of focus for the Framework should be to reduce the time taken between the end of the financial year and the official publication of the data (end of January 2016 this year).
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Perth and Kinross Council Response

1. **How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?**

The consensus within Perth and Kinross is that the LGBF is a useful document when undertaking quarterly and annual reviews of performance. It also provides useful information when seeking ad hoc opportunities for benchmarking both nationally and within the family groups. This information also provides a valuable challenge and scrutiny opportunity for Elected Members.

2. **In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?**

The data is predominately used to advise on annual performance reports to Committees to provide comparators with similar Councils or to measure areas of effectiveness that are not available from other national forums such as Waste Managers Network, Scottish Housing Best Value Network or the Society of Personnel Development Scotland. The findings are then carried forward into Service and Team Plans to action any areas which would need to be improved. The main use is within the family groups to highlight issues and allow discussions to learn from other Councils which are displaying better performance, and make improvements.

3. **What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?**

The consensus within Perth and Kinross is that the data provided is sufficient. That said, a lack of consistency across Councils in how the information is collated can be challenging when services are being compared in league tables against other local authorities and the national average. More confidence and assurance could be taken from the results if the data submitted by Councils was audited or verified. Partitioning results into quartiles can be quite arbitrary and may not always reflect the distribution of results. For example, where variances within the range are quite minor a Council can find measures recorded in the lower quartile, even though the results are only a fraction less than Councils in higher quartiles. This makes performance appear much worse than it is.
Renfrewshire Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

Renfrewshire Council utilises the LGBF within a number of performance management approaches:

- Quarterly performance scorecards – services monitor relevant LGBF performance on a quarterly basis and discuss the data at senior management meetings.

- Service improvement plans – these include service improvement plan scorecards, these scorecards include all LGBF indicators as stimulated in our service plan guidelines. These plans are discussed at the relevant policy board every 6 months, this provides an opportunity for Elected Members to scrutinise LGBF performance, against targets and trend information.

- Audit Scrutiny & Petitions Board – this annual report to our Audit, Scrutiny & Petitions Board it informs Elected Members of our performance overall for the framework including our ranked position, Scottish average and the family group position for each indicator. It also informs the Board of any benchmarking activity and corrective action underway by the relevant service.

- Public Performance Report “It’s all about you” – this is our public facing document, it is an infographic publication which covers a selection of LGBF indicators, providing information on trend data, Scottish averages and our performance against targets.

- LGBF Benchmarking groups and informal benchmarking activity – we are engaged with the LGBF benchmarking family group process and have participated in all so far, including leading on one of the pilot groups. In addition to the LGBF formal benchmarking activity we have also queried and made contact with a number of authorities on the back of the LGBF data e.g. democratic core costs, museum services and positive destinations for school pupils.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

Renfrewshire Council has worked closely with SOLACE and the Improvement Service on the development of this project and this approach to benchmarking helps us deliver better services more efficiently and improve outcomes for communities and individuals.

The framework has already helped us to work more closely with other Councils, to gain a more rounded picture of how we are performing nationally and to learn from others. We continue to use this data to ‘start a conversation’ and how we can use this information to identify where we can improve service delivery.
3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The LGBF Project Board recognises that some of the indicators are no longer fit for purpose or new ones should be introduced for the Curriculum for Excellence, or homelessness indicators to be added. Equally that some of the indicators could be improved like the customer satisfaction PIs and a handful of cost indicators.

Renfrewshire Council position is that the Economic Development category should be expanded to include an additional indicator(s). And the home/social care indicators should be improved to reflect, some of, the nine national outcomes for Health & Social Care integration.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Shetland Islands Council Response

Questions regarding local government benchmarking framework were circulated to Shetland Islands Council and the following responses were gathered:

**Community Health and Social Care**

1. **How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?**

   Occasionally, this tends to be used more at corporate level. It can be quite useful for providing authority-level comparisons but quite often there are issues with the collation of figures, particularly where data is matched against pooled budgets or where the sample size is small and highly variable.

2. **In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?**

   For certain measures we would use this data to compare with other authorities where we can be sure they are on a like-for-like basis.

3. **What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?**

   Where data is not considered to be comparable between authorities or is derived from pooled budgets an option should be given to authorities to withhold data. For example, our locality based approach within residential units means many different services are delivered from the same budget code – accurate splits of relevant budget data is often impossible.

**Housing**

I would comment that with the introduction of the comprehensive range of information and in-built benchmarking tool which the Scottish Housing Regulator put in place as part of the Scottish Housing Charter, that that is what we would tend to use for comparator information. It also has the benefit of including all landlords (Local authority and RSL) for wider comparison. So perhaps if something is to be included for Housing it should be the most relevant questions from the Charter data, forming part of the Landlord Report. That would save duplication and would unify the source of benchmark information for us.

**Human Resources**

1. **How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?**

   We use the framework throughout the year
2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

We use the framework for reporting purposes and referring to when looking at improvement plans and for setting targets

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

It would be helpful to know what staff groups each council has so when we consider targets and improvements we can compare to council with the same staff groups – marine, care, teaching etc.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

South Lanarkshire Council Response

1. *How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?*

The Council has developed an annual process which begins even before the final results are available in January, designed to ensure that the figures are considered by the Corporate Management Team, reported to Elected Members, and potential improvement actions are identified and approved for the year ahead.

The results feed into a number of reports and performance reporting processes throughout the year, informing local planning processes and performance reporting.

2. *In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?*

The Framework is used in a number of ways. Senior management and Elected Members receive notification of the results, together with an assessment of how performance has changed and how it compares with the Scottish average and where the Council sits in terms of quartile position.

Each year, the results are examined within Resources by service management teams and staff with a view to understanding why the local authority is reporting the performance shown; and to establish if any improvement actions are required to improve performance.

The Framework is also used as a key element of our public performance reporting, providing a means of comparing our performance with other authorities and showing how performance has changed over time.

The Framework is also used, if appropriate, within the context of any service reviews which are undertaken, since benchmarking is a key element of any review process.

The framework and results are used more as a ‘can opener’, with the understanding that further analysis may be required to understand different results. This is one of the areas of work currently being carried out under the umbrella of family group activities.

3. *What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?*

To date, the LGBF has provided a useful tool for examining the question of service performance and the drivers of cost at a local level. As the framework matures and as trends become more pronounced, the value of the information will continue to grow, and should form a valuable resource for local government in the future.

However, the following areas would benefit from further work:

- The framework needs to be built on robust and meaningful data, and so efforts should continue to improve the quality of information and to
eliminate variations which are due to administrative processes or differences in how things are counted.

- In discussion within this authority, there have been concerns raised about the user satisfaction indicators within the framework, which differ sometimes quite markedly from the results of local surveys into user satisfaction. Further work in this area would be beneficial, e.g., release of more specific data from the survey, including the questions actually asked, participants’ comments, breakdown of results by location.

- There needs to be a greater recognition that the question of what constitutes good performance (which way is “up”) is not always straightforward or uncontroversial. This is especially true in services such as education and social care, where the cost and the quality of service are inextricably linked. To give another example, councils are marked “down” for higher spending on roads, even though this leads to better service, is popular with residents and contributes to the area’s economic success.

- The framework benchmarks a good range of unit costs but it is less comprehensive in terms of service outcomes. This would be another area that could be strengthened.

- As a matter of course there should be agreement between the LGBF and other major performance reporting requirements (e.g., statistical returns to the Scottish Housing Regulator) in terms of the definition of indicators. Where the LGBF overlaps with other reporting requirements, consideration should be given to reducing duplication of reporting requirements.

- It is a recurring issue that stronger links could be made between the framework and the other benchmarking groups that already exist and are considering and debating similar issues.

- Finally, it would be helpful at this stage if a range of housekeeping work could be undertaken to simplify and standardise the language used in the definition of indicators, and to tidy up some of the loose ends that have arisen due to the evolution of the framework across several iterations. There have been some challenges highlighted in relation to come cost indicators, where the source data may not be prepared in the same way in each Local Authority. This is being remedied through a review of the process for the development of the Local Financial Return. It is important to maintain a focus on this to ensure the LGBF is seen as robust.
Response from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to the call for written evidence from the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

Our general comments relate to the consideration of benchmarking more widely within the Local Government sector, than to the specific role of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

We understand that the core purpose of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework is to develop, on a collaborative basis, a comparative benchmarking framework for Scottish Local Government that supports the targeting of improvement activities and resources to areas of greatest impact in terms of efficiency/costs, productivity and outcomes. In doing so, the Benchmarking Framework considers a number of high level indicators to identify a small number of ‘headline’ measures.

By contrast, the Local Authority Complaints Network currently uses detailed complaints handling performance information provided by all 32 councils to compare, contrast and benchmark performance. In its most recent benchmarking of performance for the year 2014-15, the Complaints Network worked closely with the Improvement Service to further benchmark performances for improvement by considering additional factors, such as urban, rural and in relation to socio-economics, and how these may be used to better understand complaint performance. This approach has helped complaints handlers, managers and senior officers in Local Government to:

- better understand their own performance by sharing and learning from other councils,
- identify where, and why councils performance varies,
- use that learning to improve their own complaints handling performance, and
- identify and share good practice across all 32 councils.

As members of the Local Government Complaints Handlers Network, we are aware of the good work in relation to benchmarking that is undertaken by this group. The performance data it considers is detailed and, therefore, appropriate in the operational context of managing complaints, rather than being appropriate in the high level suite of indicators as used by the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

The Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network benchmarking outputs add value in an operational context for individual local authorities. They provide useful information for use through annual audits and self-assessment. The complaints handlers network provides an excellent forum for benchmarking at an operational level.

Our view is that there would be benefit in having appropriate governance arrangements in place to allow the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network outputs to be considered at a strategic level by the sector, possibly by SOLACE as part of their consideration of wider benchmarking indicators.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Sterling Council Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

- Following the annual publication of the LGBF data we report the information to our 5 decision making committees.
- Regularly throughout the year when colleagues from various services participate in the Family Group benchmarking process.
- Regularly throughout the year at Senior Management and Service Management Team meetings.
- During the annual Priority Based Budgeting process when developing opportunities for efficiency savings (some service areas only).

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

- The LGBF data is scrutinised by our 5 decision making committees.
- A number of our services are involved in Family Group benchmarking to compare performance and identify opportunities for improvement (Council Tax, Museums, Waste Services, HR, Street Cleaning, Sport & Leisure, and Equalities).

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

- Review and development of the LGBF indicator set to cover:
  - Customer satisfaction
  - Education – measures from the ‘Insight’ tool.
  - Homelessness
  - Planning
  - Economic Development

- Regular assessment and review of the methodology of existing indicators to ensure they remain relevant and provide assurance to our senior leaders, managers and staff that we are measuring like for like across councils. In particular Stirling would like to review of the following indicators:
  - Cost per visit to libraries
  - Self-directed support (direct payments) spend on adults 18+ as a % of total spend on adults 18+
  - Cost of trading standards and environmental health per 1,000 population.
  - Central support services (external to services) as a proportion of council running costs
- Domestic noise – average time (hours) between time of complaint and attendance on site, for those requiring attendance on site.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee - Benchmarking Framework Consultation.

Unison Scotland Response

UNISON is Scotland’s largest public sector trade union representing members delivering services across Scotland. UNISON members deliver a wide range of services in local government. UNISON is able to analyse and collate their experience as service users and staff to provide evidence to the committee. UNISON welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on the Local Government Benchmark Framework.

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

Yes, we are aware of the benchmarking framework.

Generally speaking we use the framework for accurate comparable information on local authorities to inform our own policy making process, contributions to the wider Scottish policy process or for local bargaining.

While the data in the report is useful, due to the time taken to collect and collate it is “last year’s” data: the most up to date report published in 2015 contains data from 2014. This is the best available data and so we make use of it but we believe that Scotland could do better. A more “open data” approach to data access across local government (and government as a whole) in Scotland would mean that people looking for information on local authorities “performance” would be able to obtain both up-to-date information and to choose which indicators they themselves thought were important rather than making use of what others have decided matters.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

No.

The report focuses too heavily on “cost measures” and too few council services to be an accurate reflection of council performance. UNISON has always said that traditional accounting based methods of measuring performance which concentrate on cost are not suitable for public services. “Efficiency and effectiveness in the public services are about more than price” We think we need to take into account of on inputs, outputs and outcomes plus any process measures.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The framework is itself, clear, easy to use, well written with useful tables and graphs. For UNISON the issue is not “needing help” to make use of the data but whether this is the best way to give citizens access to data about their public services. We believe that moving towards open data with citizens able to access data held by public bodies is a better way forward.
Across the world a range of public bodies are operating systems where citizens’ are able to access live data help by public bodies to enable them to campaign round the issues they care about and to assess the performance of those bodies on the benchmarks that they chose. In Scotland we still seem stuck in a mind set of “What are we already recording?”

Rather than

“What do we need to find out?”

Reports are then published which do contain high quality data but collating and analysing the information and publishing the report takes time meaning that much of the data we are all working with is at best two or three years old.

We had hoped that Scotland Performs would be the first step towards improving this. UNISON believes that Scotland Performs has not lived up to our or the Scottish Government’s aspirations. Virginia Performs, on which the system is supposed to be based, offers both easy-to-read graphics for a range of geographical and subject areas for those looking for snapshots as well as explanations/discussions of issues and extensive data for those seeking wider information or wishing to do their own analysis.

Sites like Virginia Performs( http://vaperforms.virginia.gov/), Baltimore’s city website (https://data.baltimorecity.gov/ ) and San Francisco’s (http://datasf.org/) give access to data that require freedom of information requests in Scotland, including the amounts of individual procurement contracts. Citizens can also request specific data tables be added to the sites. This type of approach is much more democratic as it is citizens not politicians who choose the benchmarks.

UNISON is supportive of initiatives like Oxfam’s The Human Kind Index as a way of moving towards measuring impact on the wellbeing of people rather than purely economic/accounting indicators as the effectiveness/efficiency of public bodies. The Scottish Government was very positive when the report was published. UNISON would like to see more concrete steps taken to move towards including something similar in our analysis of public service performance and Scotland’s wellbeing in general.

**Conclusion**

UNISON members deliver a wide range of services in the public, community and private sector. UNISON is able to analyse and collate their experience as service users and staff to provide evidence to the committee. UNISON welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence of the local government benchmarking framework.
1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) is a core strand of the strategic planning and performance framework in West Dunbartonshire. It is used along with a suite of additional local indicators to assess performance, identifying both areas of best practice and areas for further development. As an annual data suite the LGBF in its entirety cannot be used for ‘live’ performance management, however the family group work which supports local use of the LGBF is a useful ongoing tool.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

As mentioned above the LBGF is used alongside a range of other local data to support analysis of local performance. The individual service areas are involved in the gathering and verification of data used in the framework. Following publication each year the LGBF overview report and local analysis are reported through the West Dunbartonshire Audit & Performance Review Committee.

The data from the LGBF are also used at a local service level to inform service planning for the year ahead. This involves assessing the performance trend and relative ranking for each individual indictor, supplemented by a range of local data.

The family group work which underpins the LGBF as a tool for sharing practice allows for a deeper analysis of variation across comparator Local Authorities. This family group work also allows for a local ‘drill down’ of the data which underpins each indicator, giving additional evidence and understanding of local performance.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

The LGBF has continued to evolve with each publication, responding the feedback on the quality and range of indicators within the suite. A period of consistency of indicators would benefit the users of the framework and allow for historical trend analysis. However before a final consistent suite is adopted it is important that additional existing benchmarking data is considered for inclusion, such as the indicators currently collated through the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS).

There have been some challenges highlighted in relation to come cost indicators, where the source data may not be prepared in the same way in each Local Authority. This is being remedied through a review of the process for the development of the Local Financial Return. It is important to maintain a focus on this to ensure the LGBF is seen as robust.
West Lothian Response

1. How often do you use the Local Government Benchmarking Framework?

Throughout the year.

2. In what ways do you use the Framework to see how your local authority is performing?

Support services who engage with established family groups. Undertake comprehensive analysis annually to enable further questions to be asked /prompted to drive and understand other council’s performance further.

3. What further data would you find helpful and what would help you to make use of the data in the Framework?

There was a communication last year that the framework would be branching out e.g. additional Procurement category and related measures amongst others. Updated communication would be beneficial.