Beacon Councils Scheme

Case study

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Beacon Councils Scheme

Date: 1999 to 2010

Location: England

Mission: To 'help recognise excellence and to encourage the spread of best practice'

Methods: Events, peer support and resource materials (online and in hard copy)

Spend: A total of £3 million was available as a reward grant across all successful councils in 2005. From 2003, Beacon Councils interested in undertaking peer support with other local authorities had access to an additional £2 million on top of the reward grant.[1]

Reach: By the end of the seventh round of awards, 182 local authorities in England had been awarded Beacon status.[2]

Access: Competitive programme

Context

The Beacon Councils Scheme was a competitive annual process to identify excellence and innovation among councils, and encourage selected councils – Beacon Councils – to share best practice with others.

The Beacon Councils Scheme was first recommended in a 1998 white paper from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and was officially launched in 1999.[3] The aim was for Beacon Councils 'to serve as pace-setters and centres of excellence'.[4] The initiative stemmed from the Labour Government's desire to improve standards in local government and ensure that best practice was shared between councils. This was part of the government's broader interest in modernising public services through spreading best practice. There were also Beacon Schemes in the NHS and the education system, which were independent of the Beacon Councils Scheme, but based on similar principles.[5]

Ways of working

Selection
The scheme operated as a competitive annual awards process. Each year, the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils suggested themes for that year's awards in conjunction with local and central government.[6] Themes covered different local services, and tended to reflect issues felt to be priorities for local authorities in that year. For example, in 2006/07 (round seven), the themes were:

- culture/sport for hard-to-reach groups

- delivering quality services through better procurement

- early intervention (children at risk)

- improving housing services by involving tenants

- improving rural services: empowering communities.[7]

> ## " Themes increasingly began to deal with cross-cutting issues and services. "

Over time, themes increasingly began to deal with cross-cutting issues and services.[8]

Once ministers (originally from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and subsequently from the Department for Communities and Local Government) agreed the themes for a year, councils were invited to apply for Beacon Council status. They could apply within one or multiple themes, and could submit an application individually, jointly with another council or jointly with a partner from the private, voluntary or public sector. From 2002 onwards, any local authority with Best Value status could also apply to the scheme.[9]

As part of their application, a potential Beacon Council had to fulfil three criteria. They had to:

- demonstrate innovation or excellence in their chosen theme

- have good overall corporate performance

- have a plan for how they would disseminate their approach to other local authorities, if chosen as a Beacon Council.

Applications were reviewed by the Advisory Panel, with support from civil servants. The assessment process included site visits and interviews. After reviewing applications, the Advisory Panel then made recommendations to the minister for local government on which councils ought to be awarded Beacon status. Once agreed, the names of successful councils were announced at a gala dinner.

Dissemination

After being awarded Beacon status, Beacon Councils were required to translate their dissemination plan into action. Each Beacon Council appointed a dissemination co-ordinator to lead on this process.[10] Beacon Councils could also receive advice on their dissemination plan from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).[11] Dissemination tended to occur in four main ways:

- roadshows and national or regional conferences, at which Beacon Councils within a theme would give short presentations

- open days held on the site of a Beacon Council

- resource packs and online materials, co-ordinated by IDeA

- a tailored programme of support provided by a Beacon Council, following a request from another local authority – for example, shadowing or peer support.[12]

Impact

Much has been written on the Beacon Councils Scheme and there have been a number of independent evaluations. Many of these were conducted by academics at the Warwick University Business School and include case studies and data from national surveys.

The scheme had a wide reach across England; by 2004, it was estimated that most local authorities had taken part in some form of learning activity and 182 had been awarded Beacon status in rounds one to seven.[13] Participation at Beacon events rose between 2004 and 2006, especially at open days where participant numbers rose from 30% to 58%, as well as at workshops and in the use of web-based materials.[14] The most successful dissemination methods were found to be open days, site visits and networks with other local authorities. The least successful methods were secondments and videos/CDs.[15]

> **By 2004 most local authorities had taken part in some form of learning activity.**

It has been reported that local authorities attended Beacon events to learn about best practice, or for potential reputational benefits. Some suggested that they wanted their attendance to signal to local citizens or central government that they were interested in best practice.[16]

Beacon Councils reported the three biggest benefits of taking part in the scheme as:

- the chance to raise the local authority's national profile

- improving morale in the local authority

- the opportunity to get ideas and knowledge from others.[17]

Perceived benefits of the scheme over time were studied through work commissioned as part of the Government's Local Government Modernisation Agenda, which looked at the scheme between 2004 and 2006. It found an increase in the perceived benefits of the scheme over that period, in terms of it giving information about best practice and encouraging networking.[18] In both 2004 and 2006, the cost of being a Beacon Council was seen as small, although local authorities did identify that it caused them to lose some resources from service delivery as capacity was instead spent on activities for the scheme.[19]

However, a study commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the IDeA suggested that larger local authorities were more likely to be successful in the scheme – and repeatedly so – while rural local authorities were less likely to be successful, or repeatedly involved.[20] The study recommended that more should be done to encourage smaller councils to apply to the scheme, such as targeting competition themes more directly at smaller councils. It also suggested that the amount of money available for Beacon Councils could be increased.

Insights

**Competitive programmes can encourage participation, but risk creating
a two-tiered system**

Competition can be used to encourage improvement. By only accepting the best performing applicants, areas are likely to give more time and attention to both the application process and taking part in the scheme. Competition also boosts the prestige of taking part in a programme, offering participants an opportunity to raise their national profile.

However, competitive programmes which select the highest achieving applicants risk creating a two-tiered system, with a division between those who are inside and outside of the programme. This can limit access to learning, events and resources to those outside of the scheme, reducing the extent to which areas want to share with each other, or give a perception that learning cannot be translated from one group to another. A competitive process can also increase the costs of running a programme as additional administration is needed for the bidding and assessment stages.

Further resources

Hartley, J., 'Does Innovation Lead to Improvement in Public Services? Lessons
from the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom', in Borins, S. (ed) *Innovations in Government: Research, recognition, and replication*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2008.

Notes

1. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *Government Response to the Review of the Beacon Council Scheme*, ODPM Publications, Wetherby, 2005, p. 10.
2. Hartley, J., 'Does Innovation Lead to Improvement in Public Services? Lessons from the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom', in Borins, S. (ed) *Innovations in Government: Research, recognition, and replication*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2008, p. 167.
3. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *Modern Local Government: In touch with the people*, The Stationery Office, London, 1998.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Downe, J., Hartley J. and Rashman, L., 'Evaluating the Extent of Inter-organizational Learning and Change through the Beacon Council Scheme', *Public Management Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2004, pp. 531-54. The Beacon Schools initiative was launched in September 1998, and the NHS Beacon programme was launched in 1999.
6. Hartley, J., 'Does Innovation Lead to Improvement in Public Services? Lessons from the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom', in Borins, S. (ed) *Innovations in Government: Research, recognition, and replication*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2008, p. 165.
7. LocalGov, 'Beacon Councils', 31 October 2006, retrieved 9 June 2016, www.localgov.co.uk/Beacon-Councils/28698
8. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *Government Response to the Review of the Beacon Council Scheme*, ODPM Publications, Wetherby, 2005.
9. Best Value status was introduced as part of the Local Government Act 1999. According to the legislation, a Best Value authority 'must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (British Government, *Local Government Act 1999 Section 3 (1)*, The Stationery Office, London, 1999, p. 3).
10. Hartley, J., 'Does Innovation Lead to Improvement in Public Services? Lessons from the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom', in Borins, S. (ed) *Innovations in Government: Research, recognition, and replication*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2008, p. 166.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hartley, J. and Rashman, L., 'Leading and Learning? Knowledge transfer in the Beacon Council Scheme: Improving services through sharing good practice', *Local Government Studies*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2008, pp. 683-700.
13. Hartley, J., 'Does Innovation Lead to Improvement in Public Services? Lessons from the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom', in Borins, S. (ed) *Innovations in Government: Research, recognition, and replication*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2008, p. 167.
14. Hartley, J., Rashman, L. and Ungemach, C., *Longitudinal Analysis of the Beacon Scheme: The Beacon Scheme and the national surveys of English local authorities 2004 and 2006*, Communities and Local Government Publications, Wetherby, 2008, p. 13.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
16. Downe, J., Hartley J. and Rashman, L., 'Evaluating the Extent of Inter-organizational Learning and Change through the Beacon Council Scheme', *Public Management Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2004, pp. 532-53, p. 538.
17. Hartley, J., Rashman, L. and Ungemach, C., *Longitudinal Analysis of the Beacon Scheme: The Beacon Scheme and the national surveys of English local authorities 2004 and 2006*, Communities and Local Government Publications, Wetherby, 2008, p. 11.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
20. Hartley J. and Withers, E., *Predictors of Beaconicity: Which local authorities are most likely to apply to, be short listed and awarded through the Beacon Scheme – long-term evaluation of the Beacon Scheme*, Communities and Local Government Publications, Wetherby, 2007, p. 25.

About the authors

Sophie Wilson is a Researcher at the Institute for Government. Since joining the Institute in 2015, she has been involved in its ministerial development programme and work on public service delivery. Prior to this, Sophie was a researcher at the Office for Public Management, working on a range of engagement and evaluation projects across UK public services. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge and a BA from King's College London.

Alice Lilly is a Researcher at the Institute for Government, having first joined the Institute as an intern in 2015. She is currently finishing her PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham, which explores transatlantic links in anti-poverty policy during the 1990s and early 2000s, under New Labour and the New Democrats. While a PhD student, Alice spent a short time as an intern at the Social Market Foundation. Prior to undertaking her PhD at Nottingham, she completed an MA in American Studies, also at Nottingham, and a BA in History at the University of Cambridge.

Acknowledgements

About the project

Last year, the Institute for Government began a major research project on public service delivery at a local level in England. This is a vast, complex terrain and there are many important areas that require urgent attention – whether it is how to drive efficiency savings, deliver digital transformation or make effective use of all providers in a local area, including voluntary and private sector organisations. We decided to focus on one aspect that is critical to achieving better public service outcomes for citizens: joining up and integrating public services around local, citizen needs.

Our briefing paper, *Joining Up Public Services around Local, Citizen Needs*, identified five perennial barriers that repeatedly hinder integration at a local level, as well as several insights on how to tackle them. Limited sharing of what works (and doesn't work) emerged as a critical barrier that needs urgent attention. Although variation is crucial in ensuring that public services meet local needs, not learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, is costly, time intensive and risks duplicating the progress made in other parts of the country. At a time when capacity within local government is declining, and less money is available for service delivery, we cannot afford to keep reinventing the wheel.

A set of eight case studies, including this one, provides more detail about the methods and impact of different approaches designed to support learning between areas. Our accompanying paper, *Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate services and improve outcomes*, provides much-needed clarity on what would help people leading integration programmes to share experiences and learn from one another to improve outcomes on the ground.

For more information and resources, visit www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery

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