

LAs compare processes to achieve best practice

South East Counties Service Improvement Group (SECSIG)

Organisations: Buckinghamshire County Council, Dorset County Council, East Sussex County Council, Hampshire County Council, Isle of Wight, Kent County Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Surrey County Council, West Sussex County Council.

Case Study Ref No: 251 **Date:** March 2004

Sector: Local Authority

Themes: Benchmarking, Business Processes, Continuous Improvement.

Counties in the south east of England have pooled resources to develop a framework for benchmarking and sharing best practice. The South East Counties Service Improvement Group (SECSIG) was formed in response to the government's Best Value criteria for assessing the performance of local government highway services. The initiative stems from local authorities' (LAs) need to compare the value of their services with others. The group operates via nine autonomous theme groups. Examples from the Road Safety Theme Group show how SECSIG works and illustrate its practical outcomes.

Key benefits

SECSIG members have:

- agreed common sets of performance indicators and measurements
- identified the processes involved in delivering particular services
- discovered the best practice in the group for each process
- helped each other to improve.

“SECSIG provides a common agenda and language for local authorities to collaborate in achieving Best Value.”

Outputs

Specific outputs are:

- a partnership guide
- performance indicator data for each theme
- process maps and data
- best practice definition.

Outcomes

Members are gaining service improvements and evidence for Best Value inspection, as the following examples show.

Surrey is aiming to improve its record in defending third party/

public claims by adopting ideas from Hampshire.

Kent has a revised policy on commuted sums for development control agreements.

West Sussex developed a new framework for auditing highway safety aspects of planning applications.

Best Value

The Best Value principles, announced in 1998, are the basis for measuring the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) introduced in 2000. Summarised as four Cs – challenge, compare, consult and compete – Best Value is more difficult to quantify than the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) system it replaces. CCT usually boiled down to getting the lowest price for a given level of service, while Best Value challenges officers to get the best level of service for a given sum of money. This subtle difference leads to the question: “Who does this better than us?”

Rob Salmon, Assistant Head of Highways and Transport at West Sussex County Council, was an early proponent of SECSIG. “SECSIG gives us confidence that we have a methodology and we’re ready for Best Value or CPA inspections,” he says.

Lessons learned

- It is not enough to compare performance indicators (PIs). You need to explore the processes.
- Some process comparisons readily arise from comparing PIs, for example actions to improve pedestrian safety.
- Other processes are worth comparing even without PIs, for example cycle training for children.
- Get people who are performing below par to lead process comparison; it’s an effective motivator.

The challenge

How to respond to Best Value has been the main driver. “There has been a lot of ‘loose’ guidance from central government,” explains Salmon. “Also, since most authorities are structured differently, make different use of consultants and have different political agendas, there was widespread concern that it would all become bureaucratic.”

SECSIG provides a common agenda and language for local authorities to collaborate in achieving Best Value.

Inception and growth

Five southeast counties – Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire – founded SECSIG in September 1999. Within three months the steering group had formed theme groups and adopted a framework. Dorset joined the group to provide a direct link with the southwest region. By April 2000 PIs had been agreed and work then

began on process comparisons. A year later, member authorities had measured comparable PIs and within another year service improvements were emerging. All this was achieved in less than three years after SECSIG was born, and as its success became known, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Isle of Wight joined SECSIG, making nine members in all.

Organisation

All partner authorities are represented on a Management Board which meets quarterly. Partners take turns to chair and support the Board. An authority with a particular interest in a theme (or need to improve) normally leads that Theme Group. These groups usually meet quarterly and attract a cross section of professionals. Dissemination happens informally in the professional network and formally via the Board, to which each theme group reports. Partner authorities are expected to carry an equitable distribution of the workload.

Themes

The nine sub-groups cover:

- road safety
- network management
- maintenance
- parking
- highway development control
- waste management
- procurement
- local transport plan
- customer service.

Methods

Examples from the Road Safety Theme Group show how SECSIG works.

Performance indicators – This group is focussed on achieving national road safety targets for 2010. The headline target calls for the total number of killed and seriously injured (KSI) to fall by 40%. But extrapolating SECSIG data shows that without increased efforts, this target is unlikely to be met, thus justifying increased investment. This is one of 20 PIs, some of which are difficult to measure. The answers should emerge as SECSIG's database grows.

Comparing processes – A comparison of methods revealed differences in how SECSIG members conducted road safety audits. A subsequent training day for auditors highlighted variations in audit processes and led to an informed discussion on how to improve this service.

Identifying best practice – Following a comparison of cycle training (CT) by SECSIG members, West Sussex decided to improve its service

Next steps

■ About improving business processes:

- Read the fact sheet *Business Process Improvement* at www.constructingexcellence.org.uk.
- Visit the ActionZone at www.constructingexcellence.org.uk.

■ About how Constructing Excellence works with local authorities:

- Contact the Local Government Task Force at www.constructingexcellence.org.uk.

■ Constructing Excellence has:

- a network of advisors to help you
- fact sheets on a range of best practice business topics
- a Constructing Excellence club near you.

■ The Construction Productivity Network holds workshops on best practice business topics,

T 020 7549 3300, www.ciria.org.uk.

by:

- producing a manual for CT instructors
- giving instructors additional training in causes of cycling accidents
- giving instructors further first aid training
- introducing a voluntary charge for CT
- transferring all new materials to other SECSIG members.

Identifying service improvements – Within six months of joining SECSIG after a poor report on its highway services, the Isle of Wight gained an improved rating from the Best Value auditor.

Transferability

The concept of SECSIG is especially powerful in situations where compliance with regulations and performance standards is audited, such as transportation and utilities.

The many benchmarking clubs (see the KPIZone at Constructing Excellence) offer similar though less rigorous support networks.

What happens next

Because it has achieved its initial objectives so substantially, SECSIG is re-examining the focus of each theme group. It plans to build in the needs of the new Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) guidelines that will be used to judge overall Local Authority Highway Service delivery in 2006.

The Network Management Theme Group is tackling the vexed question of comparable PIs for congestion, which will link to the implementation of the Government's proposed Traffic Management Bill.

Constructing Excellence

25 Buckingham Palace Road
London
SW1W 0PP

www.constructingexcellence.org.uk

T Helpdesk 0845 605 55 56

E helpdesk@constructingexcellence.org.uk

SECSIG

Rob Salmon
Assistant Head of Highways
and Transport

West Sussex County Council
County Hall,

Chichester PO19 1RQ

T 01243 777504

E rob.salmon@westsussex.gov.uk

