

Best practice in municipal pet management - performance indicating and benchmarking

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ABSTRACT

In the context of best practice (BP) it helps to think of municipal pet management (MPM) as a business. It is a business made up of four interdependent components which include:

- dealing with service requests;
- maintaining pet registration/education service;
- ensuring compliance with relevant laws; and
- monitoring quality control in service provision and governance.

The quest for best practice in MPM requires that each of these four components be constantly scrutinised for activity, effectiveness, efficiency and competitiveness.

Because activity, effectiveness and efficiency can't be assessed unless results are both measured and tracked, performance indicating in these things is a first prerequisite in the quest for best practice. Because competitiveness can't be assessed unless performance is also compared between local authorities, benchmarking is the next. Because councils can't benchmark without having data sharing partners, benchmarking partnerships are the third need.

Benchmark partnerships (provided they can be satisfactorily coordinated) allow cooperating councils to assess the contestability of their performance in whatever field they choose to focus. MPM is just as important as library services, waste management or roads and drainage services so there is no reason to exclude MPM from the benchmarking process.

The idea of making possible an inter-council benchmark partnership in MPM is a new one and because of this there will inevitably be some difficulties experienced in getting them up and running. But it is as easy as it is lame to do no more than identify reasons why such partnerships might be difficult to achieve. The challenge is to firstly identify the problems ... and then secondly to find the solutions.

INTRODUCTION

This paper follows on from the theme of the paper 'Best Practice in Municipal Pet Management: Information Access is the Key to Competitive Efficiency in Both Governance and Service Delivery' which was presented at the Local Government Association of Queensland's (LGAQ) Animal Management Seminar and published in the proceedings of the National Urban Animal Management Conference in Adelaide (Murray, 1997).

The notion proposed by that paper was that best practice (whatever the practice) can only be approached if the following three types of management information are available:

- information about the job itself - having the essential job skills;
- information about the market - knowing what the customer wants;
- information about service quality - measuring delivery performance.

In the context of best practice it helps to think of MPM as a business. It is in fact just that - a business made up of the following four, interdependent components:

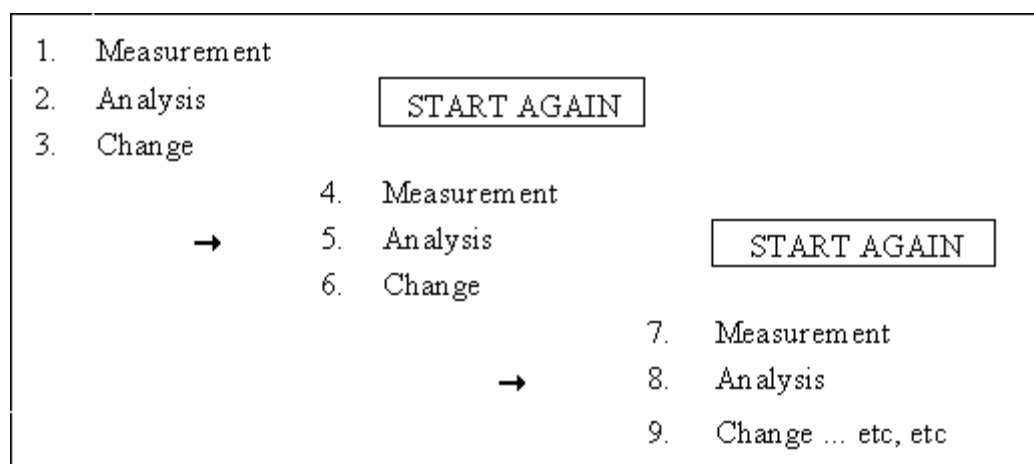
1. dealing with service requests eg complaints and advice;
2. maintaining a pet registration and owner services;
3. ensuring compliance with relevant laws ie enforcement;
4. monitoring quality control in service provision ie governance and service delivery.

To seek best practice in the business of MPM, local authorities need to obtain the above three kinds of information as they relate to each of the above four functional components of their MPM systems. They need this information to assess two things:

1. their performance trends by comparing the results they are getting now with those they were getting before; and
2. the contestability of their performance by comparing the results they are getting with those of other local authorities.

Each of these things can only be done by an organised process of performance indicating and benchmarking.

The essential and simple theme of the benchmarking is that best practice can only be achieved by the following (continuously recurring) three stage process:



It is only by analysing in this way what council pet management officers are doing (and what results they are getting) that local authorities can assess the competence of their performance in MPM.

WHY BOTHER WITH BEST PRACTICE IN PET MANAGEMENT?

Local government has traditionally had two roles. One, already mentioned, is the provision of community management services. The other is the provision of community governance. Of these two roles governance is the most important. Governance is at the heart of democracy. It is about people choosing leaders from among themselves to manage their own communities. Good governance includes good service delivery.

Local government has two roles:

1. governance
2. service delivery

A summary of these observations might be put as follows:

1. councils are like conventional private sector business corporations except that the company directors are the elected councillors while the shareholders are the ratepayers;
2. MPM is a service provided by the council (corporation) for the community (clients);
3. this service, like other community management services has to be delivered in a way that is both effective and efficient;
4. this service (MPM), like other local government coordinated community management services must also meet the special constraints necessitated by community service obligation and direct public accountability;
5. it is actually harder for public sector corporations to be competitive because the services they provide have the additional obligatory requirements of business transparency, openness and accountability.

Best practice is a journey rather than a place. It is a way of thinking. It is a method of business management. Best practice is about being able to say:

- yes, we are doing a decent job; and
- yes, our performance is meeting acceptable industry standards;
- yes, we are competitive; and
- yes, we can prove it.

Assessing adequacy in practice performance depends to a very large degree on knowing what *others* are achieving in the same field of endeavour under *similar* circumstances

The quest for best practice primarily requires that organisations seeking it need to understand their existing service provision capability:

1. this understanding must focus on identifying customer needs as much as it does on reviewing the efficiency of the service provision;
2. this includes an appreciation of how well other organisations in the same field are performing by way of comparison in both aspects.

The idea of performance comparison is central to the concept of BP. Assessing adequacy in practice performance depends to a very large degree on knowing what others are achieving in the same field of endeavour under similar circumstances. Circumstances are always changing - the goal posts keep shifting. This is why best practice is a moving target.

There are a number of powerful personal drivers fuelling the quest for BP in service industries.

There are a number of powerful personal drivers fuelling the quest for best practice in service industries in general. These include:

1. the personal satisfaction that comes from performing well and knowing it;
2. the self esteem that comes from peer recognition and respect for high achievement;
3. the need to survive as service providers in a competitive business environment.

In public sector service providers, there are also statutory drivers. Under the influence of the Hilmer Report and the Trade Practices Act (TPA) with the introduction of National Competition Policy (NCP) and with the concept of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), local government has been given a challenge. That challenge is to deliver community management services of BP standard. This means having to develop a business mentality in their traditional role as providers of community management services. The main point in NCP and CCT is that the challenge is an imperative rather than an option. It is not something that councils can leave on the back burner for a while - BP is something that local government has to bother with now.

There are also statutory drivers

The difference between winners and losers in today's business environment mostly hinges on having the ability to deliver products and services that are superior to those of competitors. It also depends on having the ability to provide better delivery per se. The interface between private and public sector 'business' is far from seamless. The two have some differences and some similarities, but both are obliged to pursue BP.

Who will survive? Companies that adopt constancy of purpose for quality, productivity, and service, and go about it with intelligence and perseverance, have a chance to survive. They must of course, offer products and services that have a market. Charles Darwin's law of the survival of the fittest, and that the unfit do not survive, holds in free enterprise as well as in nature's selection.

W. Edwards Demming

WHY BOTHER WITH BENCHMARKING IN PET MANAGEMENT?

Benchmarking is the pathway to best practice

All councils have always had a clear obligation to perform in terms of community service delivery as best they can. These days they also have an obligation to be able to show they are doing it.

Improvements in performance can't be demonstrated unless performance is both measured and tracked. Benchmarking is not just the only way competence in MPM can be assessed, it is also the only way contestability of performance can be demonstrated and defended.

Improvements in performance can't be demonstrated unless performance is both measured *and* tracked

Benchmarking was described by Patricia Howard (1993-4) as follows:

"Benchmarking is a good starting point for any one wanting to run a better business. It involves comparing your company with others making similar products or supplying similar customers. Comparisons usually focus on time, cost and quality, but you can use a wide range of measures. Benchmarking won't show you how to do things better, but it will highlight areas you need to work on."

Marc Hequet (1993) described benchmarking as follows:

"Benchmarking compares how your company does something to how others do it. Compare widely enough and you'll find who does what best. Measure the activity carefully enough and you'll know how far you have to go to beat the best. And, not least important, ask the right questions of benchmarking partners and you'll get a pretty good idea of how to beat the best."

In summary:

1. best practice depends on benchmarking;
2. benchmarking depends on sharing performance data with other business entities that do the same job; and
3. sharing performance data depends on having benchmarking partners.

Once this has been appreciated, the first question that automatically arises (the first big stumbling block) is - why would anybody in their right mind want to share performance data with a competitor who might thereby gain over them a significant commercial advantage?

Why would anybody in their right mind want to share performance data with a competitor?

It is a good question and it is therefore very important to appreciate that benchmarking within local government is not the same as it is in more conventional commercial circles. The field of MPM provides for local government a partnership opportunity which embraces the idea of comparison rather than competition. This is a main difference and it happens to be so because separate councils are not in competition with each other even though they are all in the same business. The business of local government is providing the most appropriate community services in the most cost efficient way they can.

Even though every community is different, each from the next in one way or another, in MPM the councils are managing the same issues (barking, biting, roaming and registration) in pretty much the same way. They provide similar services and use similar work processes. In MPM different councils have no objective of take-overs or running each other out of business. They do, however, all have a major interest in doing the best they can to cater for the needs of their own unique community.

Separate councils have no objective of take-over or running each other out of business

It is worth noting that benchmarking should not detract from the organisation's core business. Nor should it unduly load or adversely affect its infrastructure or its cost efficiency. Best practice through benchmarking is all about continual improvement. It is therefore of crucial importance that benchmarking processes can never afford to be so difficult or so time consuming as to end up actually making service delivery more costly and less efficient.

Benchmarking should not detract from the organisations core business

BENCHMARK POINTS

Benchmark points are a limited number of specifically chosen performance indicators. Performance indicators are used by system managers to analyse system component function relative to activity, effectiveness and efficiency.

Benchmark points are a limited number of key performance indicators - indicators that reflect system rather than component functionality. Benchmark points when taken together as a package are intended to reflect the overall performance of any given system when it is compared with other similar systems.

The first thing to do in deriving appropriate benchmark points is to sort out a comprehensive and structured list of general performance indicators. From this general list benchmark points can be then selected. It is important to choose indicators that are expressed in global terms. It is also important that they be chosen to reflect the following types of performance:

1. activity - how many? eg what kind of complaints received ...where from ... which breeds of dogs etc?
2. effectiveness - what proportion? eg dogs registered of actual dog population... complaints resolved of those received... infringements paid of those issued etc
3. efficiency - what's it costing? eg average annual dog registration fee... officers per 1000 people population... degree of cost neutrality etc.

From the outset there should be no preconceived ideas about what factors will influence the performance outcomes from differing municipalities. It doesn't matter if the different councils represented in an MPM benchmarking partnership are urban or rural, wealthy or impoverished, big or little. Performance trends with respect to these kinds of variables may emerge, but in all probability best practice will be found to be more a product of commitment and competence than anything else.

BENCHMARKING PARTNERSHIP

It costs time and money to work up an effective system of performance indicators for benchmarking purposes. The data is therefore valuable. Confidentiality under a total non-disclosure system of coordination between partners could be assured to the extent of the integrity of the partnership coordination.

By agreement between partners it would be possible, however, for the benchmark coordinator to identify the contributor/s who turn in the best result for each benchmark point over a given period of time. This would not only give credit where due, it would also flag where advice might be sought on the process of progressive practice.

Similarly, once an effective partnership rapport has been established, there would be little to prevent an annual meeting of benchmark partners for the purpose of comparing results and sharing progressive ideas.

Under this kind of arrangement, the benchmarking partnership would allow each partner to do two critical things:

1. assess the contestability of their own performance within their global environment;
2. efficiently source information on better MPM techniques by seeking advice directly to those with better than average performance indicators.

The main point in all this is that a benchmark partnership is not just some kind of race between individual contestants to see who's best. It is, more correctly, the engine that can most efficiently drive the process of change towards best practice in each participating municipality.

While benchmarking MPM is possible, and while benchmarking has much to offer in MPM, it will be of no value unless it is done right. The gathering of useful comparative MPM performance data is not possible until partnership councils first of all agree on what exactly they are going to measure and then agree on how exactly they are going to measure it. It is a basic truth that no kind of effective benchmarking process is possible if different councils are measuring different things or even measuring the same things but scoring them in different ways.

Benchmarking MPM is possible, but it has to be organised - the process of cooperation has to be competently facilitated.

BENCHMARKING (PARTNERSHIP) RISKS

The potential of benchmarking in areas such as roads and drainage, library services and waste management has already been realised by many councils. The prospect for this kind of process in MPM is as exciting as it is challenging. But there are risks. The main areas of concern that have so far been expressed to the author are as follows:

- points of reference - making allowance for differences between municipalities eg is it possible to compare the performance results from Bourketown with those of Brisbane?
- fudging the figures - coping with performance results that may be adjusted, manipulated, falsified or corrupted in some way to advantage the 'dishonest' partner;
- confidentiality - securing the privacy of information and data that may be commercially valuable;
- convenorship - deciding who should facilitate and convene the partnership.

The significance of these problems is yet to be assessed. While not being dismissive of any of them, the author believes these problems (and possibly others not yet flagged) can all be managed if the proposed partnership of interested councils has the following qualities:

- has been carefully prepared - getting consensus, vision and mission right;
- is competently convened - kept on track and active;
- is properly facilitated - provided with appropriate and adequate resources;
- is empowered by an enthusiastic commitment to genuine cooperative endeavour.

The biggest difficulty is possibly that of finding the right partnership facilitator/convenor. There is no value in having a partnership coordinator who, though expert in benchmarking with councils, knows little or nothing about animal management - and vice versa. Much rests on the capability of the partnership convenor. So, what does the convenor have to be - what qualities does the convenor have to have?

- a recognised commitment, before all else, to local government;
- a good understanding of the meaning and significance of good governance;
- an established interest in the promotion of best practice in municipal service delivery;
- a comprehensive grasp of the theory and practice of benchmarking partnerships;
- a high level of integrity and honesty in the provision of service to clients.

PARTNERSHIP COORDINATION - FACILITATION

In arguing that a 'best practice' philosophy is in industry imperative for local government, O'Neill (1995) made the following comment:

"Local government is evolving very quickly. This change process is being made more rapid by municipal amalgamations and by industry and workplace reforms. These reforms will continue to have huge impacts across the industry, impacts that will change the way local government 'looks' and 'acts'. The challenge will be for local government to draw on its strengths, harness the current climate of change to create new opportunities for itself, and to minimise the industry's weaknesses."

The point is well made. But despite the fact that most would agree with these sentiments, the idea of using benchmarking as a tool to help councils track towards best practice in pet management will still struggle. It is a new idea and because of this there will inevitably be difficulties of implementation.

Evolving means changing and changing means being able to cope with innovation. The challenge, as O'Neill pointed out, is right there. It is as easy as it is lame to do no more than identify reasons why it might be difficult to do this. The challenge is to firstly identify the problems then secondly to find the solutions Ö. and thirdly to press on to make it work.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the great contribution of Shane Scriggins in the preparation of this paper. Shane is employed by the Townsville City Council in the position of Technical Officer (Animal Management). He has extensive local government experience in health promotion and community education and is currently a committee member of the Australian Veterinary Association's Urban Animal Management Advisory Group.

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Dick Murray is a veterinarian who, some 15 years ago, came to the conclusion that, with better municipal pet management, councils can offer their ratepayers (customers/clients) -

- Greater community amenity - better public safety, improved public health and cleaner public environs.
- Enhanced community harmony - less community stress and people getting on with each other better.
- Better animal welfare - healthier, happier and better cared for companion animals.
- Improved pet access - more people benefiting from keeping and enjoying companionship of pet animals.
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He has worked ever since to assist wherever possible in the improvement in both the policy and the practice of municipal pet management at all levels of government. To this end, with the assistance of co-author Helen Penridge, he has recently published the most complete text currently available on this subject, 'Dogs and Cats in the Urban Environment - a handbook of municipal pet management'.

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