

Chapter 9

Best Value and Performance Management Inspired Change within UK Councils: A Knowledge Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on an exploratory study from an operational perspective, investigating the role of Knowledge Management (KM) in the UK Public Sector, the case setting being within the council's waste services. Key literary findings outline that while Government seeks to improve council service delivery, significant legacies remain from earlier change programmes that appeared to be restricting the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA). Given the exploratory nature of the study, a theory building approach is adopted based on results from the exploratory study. The findings show that although knowledge and information flows could inform performance management frameworks to trigger change, a lack of suitable networks or a culture of knowledge sharing, combined with tight implementation timescales and a shifting agenda, meant that councils did not respond as anticipated due to systemic weaknesses. As with many organisations, KM implementation did not reach full potential. However, there are a number of lessons learned and key findings that can act as a learning process for further knowledge management applications within public sector contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the role of Knowledge Management (KM) in the UK Public Sector by examining local government change from a knowledge and performance measurement perspective using a theory building study. KM is an umbrella term which includes issues around management change programmes such as performance measurement, knowledge service management, absorptive capacity, communities of practice, knowledge culture, knowledge networks and knowledge sharing. The essence of KM is to manage change within organisations to get the ‘right knowledge and information to the right people in the right format’ (Davenport and Prusak, 1998) on time to influence decisions and contribute to organisation operations, sustainability and development.

This chapter considers a KM approach within best practice waste services in the UK Public Sector, selected as they were participants of a UK-wide Beacon scheme, and an additional council Northern Ireland,. The Beacon scheme was established in 1999 to share best practice in service delivery across local government, with Beacon status awarded to authorities who demonstrated a clear vision, excellent services and a willingness to innovate within a theme, such as performance measurement. During the lifecycle of the scheme (replaced by the Local Innovation Awards [LIA] Scheme in April 2010) a total of 563 awards were made involving 217 authorities and 12 best value authorities.

The Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a review of best value’s first year results and concluded both it, and the Best Value Inspectorate (BVI), required simplification to allow councils to focus on continuous improvement and community priorities, rather than simply on the review process itself. Criticisms were levelled by the LGA at the standardised formats employed by the BVI which were often inappropriate for smaller councils. Suggestions tendered were focused on

reducing bureaucracy and cost of the inspection programme, with a more flexible system proposed to measure knowledge-based capabilities and their performance on best value (Battor et al., 2008). It summarised that best value was designed to (1) instil change to deliver continuous improvement, (2) focus upon knowledge-based results and outcomes, not processes, (3) deliver to local stakeholders, and (4) involve stakeholders in the democratic process. The LGA also posed questions about how other LGMA programmes (such as local strategic partnerships) fitted within best value and it asserted Government needed to streamline their initiatives, adopt a more strategic and knowledge based approach with less prescription, and strike a better balance between incentives, resources and support (LGA, 2001).

As a sector, local government waste services are considered to be an essential, universal service provided by local authorities to every householder within a borough. They are highly dynamic and strongly driven to comply with EU environmental legislation to divert ever-increasing tonnages away from landfill and to improve recycling. In the UK, these services are presently being delivered against a back-drop of austerity and tight financial control which means new methods of service delivery are being considered, such as outsourcing collection services. As the facilities needed to treat waste are industrial in scale, planning is rarely straightforward with many constraints, such as public opposition, frequently arising. As these facilities require significant up-front investment to build they are typically supplied by the private sector which, given the monies involved, often takes years to work through the appropriate procurement protocols and are regularly subject to legal challenge.

It is against this backdrop that this chapter seeks to examine the challenges faced by public sector organisations (Local Government Agencies) when applying knowledge management principles to improve performance. The objectives are:

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