

# Case Study – Sevenoaks District Council

## Summary

Sevenoaks District Council is one of the top performing councils in the country – one of only four that achieved the maximum scores of 4 both for how it manages its performance and for how it uses its resources. It was also found to have excellent prospects for improvement and won the Management Team of the Year prize at the recent 2010 Local Government Chronicle Awards.

This case study looks in depth at its approach to managing performance and at how it achieved this success. The case study interviews were conducted as part of the 'Peer Supported Problem Solving Process' (PSPSP), the action research element of the IDeA's Managing Local Performance Project.

## About Sevenoaks

Sevenoaks is located in West Kent surrounded by East Sussex to the south, Surrey to the west and Bromley to the north. It covers almost 142 square miles and 93% is designated Green Belt. The main urban centres are Sevenoaks itself, Swanley and Edenbridge. Half the population live in the 40 or so villages and hamlets scattered throughout the district. Sevenoaks is one of 12 district councils within Kent and is wholly parished, so it forms part of a three-tier system of government.

## The journey to excellence

Just seven years ago in 2003, there was no comprehensive system of performance management within the organisation. The national BVPIs were collected but "the information went nowhere". Performance management was not seen as integral to running the organisation. Members and Management team had little interest in performance management and "relations with the Audit Commission were poor".

Robin Hales who was recruited as the new Chief Executive in 2003, gave the Head of Policy and Performance, Karl Sewell, a key objective of introducing a new performance management framework across the organisation. He also instituted a Best Value Review of performance management, looking at the culture across the organisation, whose conclusions and Improvement Plan were agreed by Members in December 2003. Councillor Peter Fleming became the new Leader of the Council in 2005, "with a fresh vision for the future where good performance management was seen as a key driver for achieving it."

The new Chief Executive described the situation he inherited as “patchy” on performance management with a few good examples in Planning and Environmental Services, but with poor systems elsewhere and resistance from service heads. Following a management team restructuring which resulted in the number of service heads being reduced from 19 to 7.5, the scale of this resistance was considerably reduced. *This experience confirms the findings of the February 2009 IDeA report - **Looking Back, Moving Forwards** – that some form of external review together with a change of regime at the top are among the most likely factors to catalyse a new era of good performance.*

From the outset, the new Chief Executive attempted to instil a culture that “we’re all in it together”, making performance management relevant to all managers and staff as “the way to manage the business”. He asked the Heads of Policy & Performance and Environmental Services to lead on showing the rest of the organisation how performance management could help. The Chief Executive’s approach was “first to establish what it is that we want to achieve, and then to ensure: a) that we get information we can rely on; b) collect, monitor and analyse it; and c) decide what we are going to do with it”. He was also keen to make sure that data was only collected “if we are going to use it”.

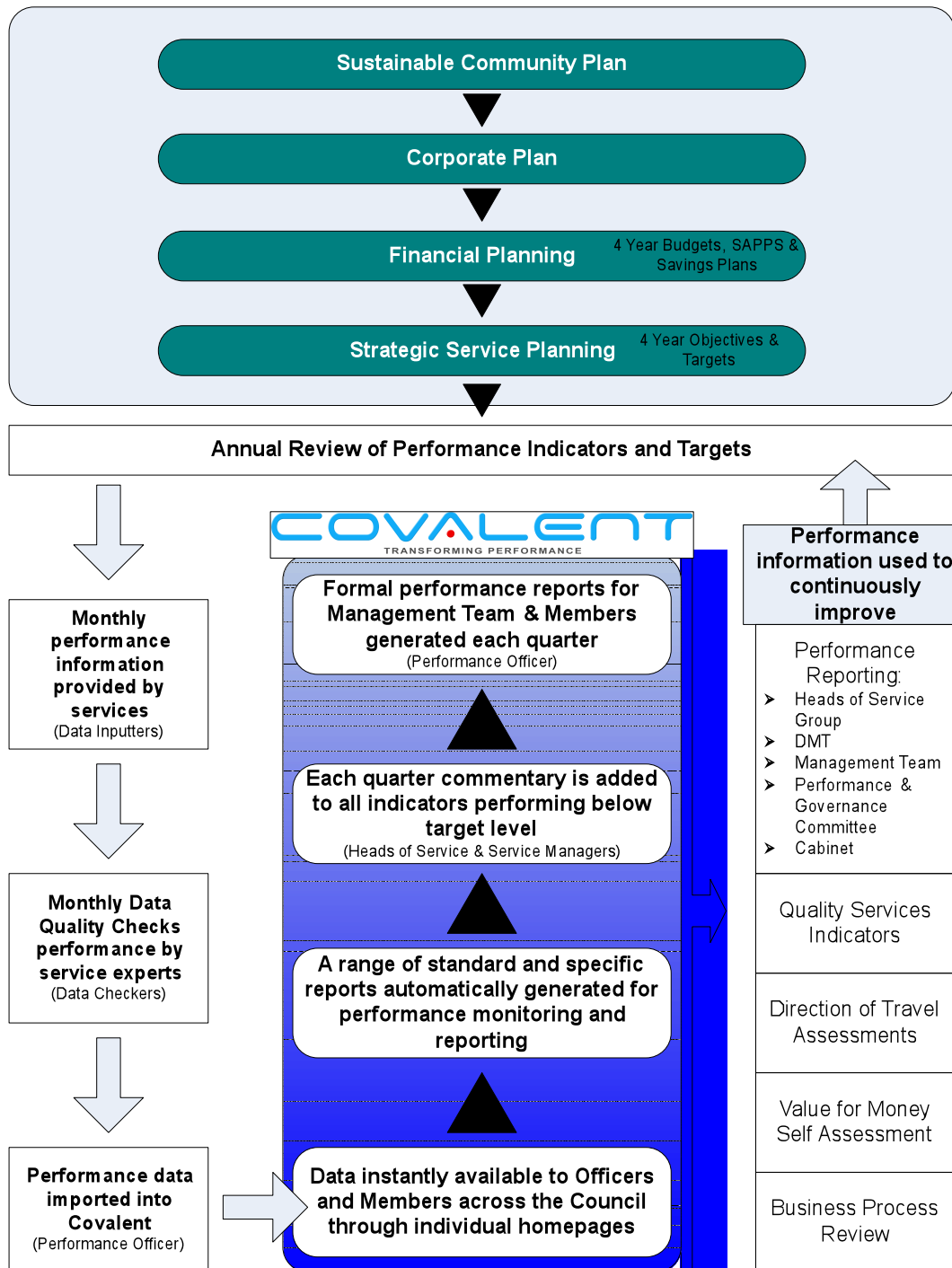
A software system, PB Views, was brought in, and within 6 months every department was using it. Staff training, learning from areas where performance management worked well, and driving from Members and senior management began to turn the situation round.

The Council’s reputation for having strong performance management arrangement was highlighted in 2005 when they were selected by the then ODPM as one of three councils to work with consultants on jointly developing the New National Performance Framework. The final report ‘Mapping the Local Government Performance Reporting Landscape’ was a key component of the 2006 White Paper.

## **Sevenoaks' Performance Management System Now**

There is no documented procedure but a Performance Management Framework diagram exists (see graphic below). Performance management is centralised around a corporate hub, but is fully embedded within departments to allow them to design performance systems that best suit their needs.

# Performance Management Framework












In 2009, the council decided to upgrade its software system for performance management and it now uses Covalent. Performance monitoring reports are generated monthly, and most service heads and directorate management teams have monthly meetings to receive and discuss the reports – the frequency of their meetings is up to them, but they understand that they will be held accountable for the data regardless of their meeting frequency. Each PI has a data owner and a data provider and the latter meet regularly with the

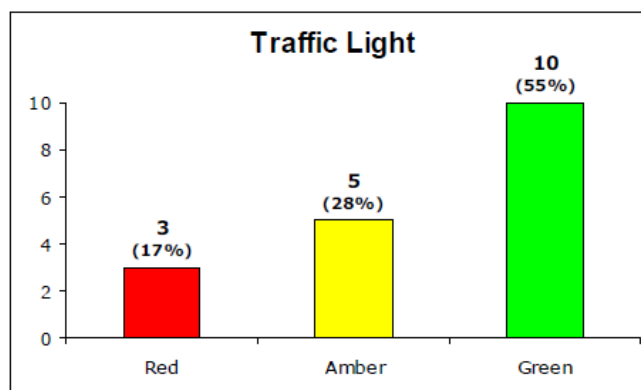
corporate Policy Team. Service Managers produce a commentary on their performance against their PIs each quarter.










Every section and department sends in a spreadsheet to the corporate centre on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. The Policy Team does a quick check on the data for any anomalies before inputting it into the system – this only takes about one hour in total, though some data is sometimes late due to different reporting cycles and/or because it originates from outside the council (eg DWP for benefits data, Kent CC for recycling data etc). It is instructive to note that in the council’s recent Investors in People (IIP) assessment, the percentage of staff that felt they fitted in with and understood the council’s plans and performance, was high enough for the council to receive a Gold rating (placing it in the top 2% of organisations nationally). The corporate Management Team receives a quarterly performance monitoring report (although exceptionally, data can be generated more often when required). In addition, monitoring reports go to Cabinet and the Performance and Governance (Scrutiny) Committee each quarter (see graphic below).

**P&G Committee - Quarter 3 Report**

Key of Symbols:

PI Status		Short Term Trends		Long Term Trends	
	Requires Attention		Improving		Improving
	Caution		No Change		No Change
	Good		Getting Worse		Getting Worse



Code	Short Name	Current Value	Current Target	Traffic Light Icon	Previous Quarter (Q2 2009-10)		Previous Year (Q3 2008-09)		Commentary
					September 2009		December 2008		
					Value	Short Trend	Value	Long Trend	
<b>Customer Services</b>									
LPI CS 1	Percentage of phone calls answered within 20 seconds by the Contact Centre	64.56%	80%		62.93%		75.94%		Staff shortages, combined with impacts from severe weather during December have impacted performance of this indicator during the last quarter. The staffing shortages have been caused by a combination of holding open position due to maternity leave, holding open a vacancy as part of contribution to budget savings and a large increase in levels of sickness leave.  Action which was planned to recruit the vacant CSA and Support Officer positions has been placed on hold pending the outcome from the Services Select Committee request for an options paper on budget cuts to this service.
LPI CS 3	Percentage of all queries answered at first point of contact by the Contact Centre	63.73%	65%		62.25%		60.54%		Activity continues to identify new processes to be handled in the Contact Centre, and achievement of this indicator is expected to be within target levels by year end.
<b>Development Services</b>									
NI 157a	Processing of planning applications: Major applications (x BV 109a)	82.61%	80.00%		85.71%		70.37%		Commentary not required

## **Performance Management in the Departments**

Environmental & Operational Services was the most advanced in using performance management as a day-to-day tool for managing the business. There was scepticism at first but indicators and data that didn't tell managers anything useful were dropped and managers and staff were involved in setting targets and choosing performance indicators, especially around unit costs which were essential for each part of the business. Different sections within the Department (eg Environmental Health, Building Control etc) were at different levels of experience and use of performance management – from thoroughly embedded to the opposite. But now they all see performance management as “the way to manage the business.”

One person from each section submits the data to the corporate centre for input into Covalent each month. An exception report on the National Indicators (NIs) goes to each Management Team for discussion. The performance monitoring forms are produced each month and shared with all supervisors and managers. They are also “displayed on notice boards and used in performance appraisals”. Members take performance management in this area very seriously with portfolio holders' meetings in areas such as street scene, built environment etc focusing on the performance monitoring data.

The success of Environmental & Operational Services is reflected in a number of innovative joint services arrangements with neighbouring councils – eg Licensing with Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells – and in the pan-Kent professional networks that have been established in a number of areas for benchmarking purposes.

## **Performance Management & Members**

Performance management is now “thoroughly embedded” with Members, who have become used to having the figures on performance available – “the statistics are there to complement our emotional or instinctive side on issues”. Key to this success has been Member champions for performance management. Cllr Jill Davison as the Portfolio Holder for Continuous Improvement and Strategic Planning and Cllr Clive Bruce as the Chair of the Performance and Governance Committee have been integral in raising the profile of performance management amongst the Council's Members.

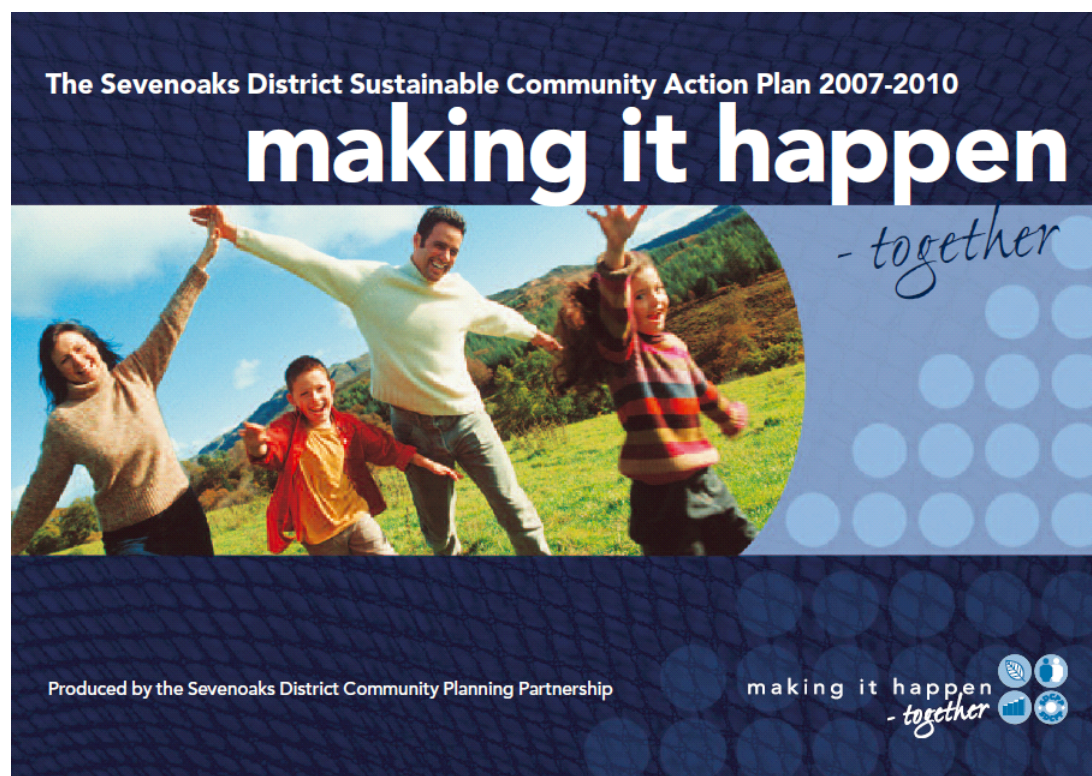
The Chief Executive also highlighted the importance of any disconnect between what the statistics appeared to be saying and the perception of the Members on the ground including the feedback they were receiving from service users and local people. Sometimes this raises an important issue such as the reality of falling crime rates in Sevenoaks (itself the safest place in Kent) and yet the perception of increasing local crime.

It is generally perceived that the Performance & Governance Committee “doesn't give officers an easy ride”. It seeks to “go beneath” the data to get at

the underlying reasons for performance problems carries out its business in a robust way, keeping officers under the spot light and challenging data to get to the underlying reasons for performance problems. The Committee refers issues to Cabinet where necessary (eg Benefit Fraud and Housing issues). Members have also increasingly asked for more detailed information – “better explanations for why performance is as it is and what is being done to address any problems” rather than the raw statistics.

## Performance Management & Partners

The Community Development Team oversees the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and the Local Area Agreement (LAA), together with parishes and the voluntary sector. The Community Development Team is involved in ongoing consultation with the parishes, the voluntary sector and many groups such as those representing older citizens, young people and those with special needs. There were two phases of consultation around the SCS - first with the above stakeholders on the priorities for the SCS and how to deliver them, and secondly via the Councils Residents Panel and district-wide events including the Youth Zone.



Delivery of the SCS was described as “driving everything we do”. The targets within the SCS are aligned with the delivery plans of the partners, and there are awaydays with partners for action planning and target-setting. Both the SCS and LAA draw on the same Covalent performance monitoring system data and commentaries as that used for the internal performance monitoring of the council. There are quarterly LSP meetings to discuss progress against

the SCS targets, usually with a focus around one particular set of outcomes. In addition, in some areas there are regular meetings (eg Leisure Trust) which go through the performance indicators one by one to ensure remedial action, provide explanations where necessary etc. Once a year there is a Leisure report provided to Performance & Governance Committee that sets out previous years performance and what is expected in the coming year.

While the relationships of trust and joint working generally are seen as most important within the LSP, nevertheless performance monitoring is also valued – with the indicators described as “the mortar that holds the bricks together”. A good example of the cross-sectoral working across the partners in Kent is Kent Social Services passporting £80,000 of money to the leisure buildings in Sevenoaks to be upgraded to meet the Disability Discrimination Act. On the other hand, Members pointed to some problems with the PCT, whose data monitoring was described by one Member as “poor and inconsistent”, and “whose budgetary priorities can change rapidly and sometimes without other partners being notified, leading to projects being suddenly dropped”.

The parishes are of varying sizes and with hugely different sized budgets – Sevenoaks town council has a budget of £1m, Edenbridge £0.5m and others much smaller. In general they do not use sophisticated performance monitoring systems.

## **Performance Management & the Public**

The Council runs a Residents Panel consisting of 1,000 people from across the District. It is used by all Council services to test customer and resident opinion, and was used for the consultation on the SCS and for discussion around the Place Survey results. The council places performance monitoring reports on its website every quarter. The council magazine, *In Shape*, is distributed to every household three times a year and gives regular updates on the performance of both the council and the LSP against the corporate plan and SCS targets, though as one Member put it “citizens are interested in outcomes not statistics”. The local newspaper, which, while not uncritical, regularly provides coverage of the Council’s activities. There is also an interesting local email, West Kent Watch, which reaches 20,000 people and contains lots of information and discussion about local issues.

Some services such as Environmental & Operational Services conduct regular customer exit surveys and mystery shopping to monitor client satisfaction levels. Members also cited feedback from service users and citizens through complaints, Freedom of Information (FoI) requests and even “people battering on Members’ doors” as representing an important component of citizen & user engagement in services.

## **New developments**

The corporate Policy Team has begun some innovative work on developing Quality Service indicators (see graphic below) bringing together the components of performance, benchmarking, turn around time, value for money, accreditation (internally and externally) and customer/user satisfaction ratings. These have been developed for seven service areas: Customer Services, Development Control, Housing Benefits, Local Tax, Refuse and Recycling, Social Housing & Street Cleaning. However there is a relative shortage of robust satisfaction data in some areas. Work is in hand to investigate a possible standardised customer exit survey to provide consistent satisfaction data, alongside better use of the Place Survey and the Residents Panel results.

*This work could potentially represent a significant step forward towards a much more rounded and customer-focused performance monitoring system. Over-reliance on traditional performance and cost indicator monitoring can relegate the customer and resident experience to second place. Developing a reporting system where this experience is captured alongside the more standard information can help to change this. Perhaps the next step might be to then link this information to resident and user choices made through relevant local participative mechanisms.*

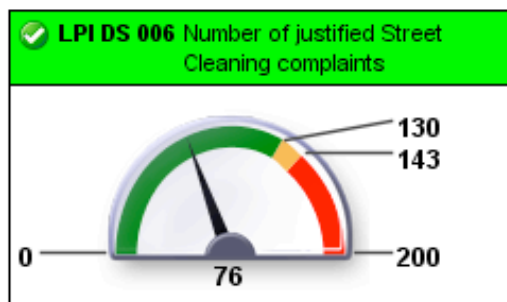
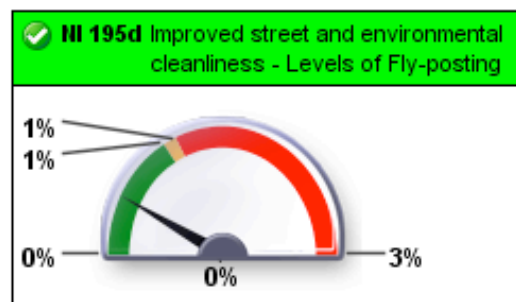
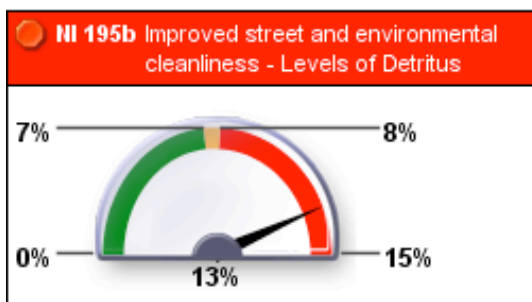
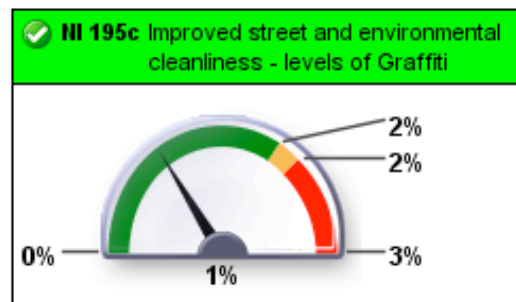
## **Summary**

Overall, it is clear that Sevenoaks' reputation for good performance management is justified. It is striking how the ethos and culture of performance management runs through the organisation as a whole and also appears positively to influence many local partners. Members and senior management however are not complacent and the move towards integrating more features such as customer feedback in the Quality Service Indicators is testimony to a continuing desire to improve.

**Davy Jones 26/4/10**

# Quality Services Performance Indicators

## Linking performance with finance and customer satisfaction levels



## Appendix

Six interviews were conducted on March 26<sup>th</sup> at Sevenoaks District Council with the following:

- 1) Karl Sewell (Head of Policy, Performance & Communications) & Lee Banks (Policy & Performance Officer);
  - 2) Richard Wilson (Head of Environmental & Operations Services);
  - 3) Simon Davies (Partnership & Projects Officer) & Mark Whyman (Sencio Community Leisure);
  - 4) Councillors Jill Davison (Cabinet Member, Strategic Planning & Performance Improvement) & Clive Bruce (Chair of Performance & Governance Committee);
- 1) Lesley Bowles (Head of Community Development); and
  - 2) Robin Hales (Chief Executive).

Quotes in the above report were taken directly from the interviews. Text in italics represents the view of the report author.

Lee Banks completed a pre-meeting questionnaire on performance management at the council and its partners.

Other resources viewed for this report include:

Sevenoaks District Community Plan 2007-2010:

[http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/community\\_living/sevenoaks\\_district\\_community\\_plan/default.asp](http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/community_living/sevenoaks_district_community_plan/default.asp)

Draft Sevenoaks District Community Plan 2010-13 (not yet publicly available).

Sevenoaks District Council Performance:

[http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/council\\_democracy\\_local\\_services/council\\_performance/default.asp](http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/council_democracy_local_services/council_performance/default.asp)

Sevenoaks District Council performance information:

[http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/council\\_democracy\\_local\\_services/council\\_performance/2323.asp](http://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/council_democracy_local_services/council_performance/2323.asp)

In addition, a range of performance monitoring reports were read and discussed.