

Local Authority Performance Indicators

Research Paper 95/39

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Under the Citizen's Charter the Government has introduced a system of performance indicators for local authority services in England, Scotland and Wales. All councils had to publish a set of indicators locally by the end of last year. The indicators were devised by the Audit Commission and, in Scotland, the Accounts Commission. These organisations will publish national comparative information on the performance indicators shortly. In England and Wales, selected information on most local services covered by the indicators will be published on 30 March; separate information on performance indicators for the police and fire services will follow on 12 April. In Scotland, all indicators will be published simultaneously by the Accounts Commission at the end of April or early in May. This paper sets out the background to the introduction of compulsory performance indicators in local government and describes the general framework of the system.

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I Background

The Major Government's White Paper **The Citizen's Charter**¹ contained a commitment to making local authorities publish performance indicators:

At present there is a wide gap in quality between the best local authority services and the worst. The legislation would require all authorities to publish - not only in committee agendas but in ways more accessible to the public - information which shows what standard of service they are providing at what cost. The standards would be on a common basis, to be prescribed following consultation, so the standards and costs in one authority can be easily compared with another. This information would be subject to checking by the auditor.

The White Paper also promised to enable the Audit Commission to publish league tables of council performance:

At present there is no easy way of comparing one authority's performance with another. The Audit Commission publishes comparisons, but these do not identify individual authorities by name. Legislation will be introduced to permit the Commission to identify individual authorities. There would be safeguards to protect genuinely confidential information. Public debate about the efficiency and quality of services would as a result be much better informed. In cases of extreme inefficiency the Government would not hesitate to use its powers to close down inefficient direct labour organisations.

These proposals were brought before Parliament in the **Local Government Bill of 1991/2**. When the Bill was published, the Local Government Information Unit expressed concern that the Audit Commission's performance indicators would highlight the cost of services rather than the quality achieved:²

Under this regime it is inevitable that league tables will become skewed to favour cheapness rather than quality. An authority that provides few or low quality services could be as high on a league table as long as they provide those limited services cheaply.

¹ Cm 1599, July 1991, p39

² LGIU Special Briefing No 38 "The Local Government Bill" December 1991

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Where there are no national standards it would be far more appropriate to require an authority to publish details of its performance in relation to standards and targets that had been set locally. This would recognise the importance of local government rather than encouraging moves towards local administration. Such an approach has already been adopted for health authorities in the government's Patient's Charter.

In Committee, Baroness Blatch stated on behalf of the Government:³

Let me make it clear that we believe it is right that authorities should determine their own standards... When it publishes its comparative information the Audit Commission will set out the standards achieved by authorities. The authorities and the electorate will be able to judge for themselves whether the standards and the costs of services provided are acceptable. We do not wish to dictate to local authorities matters which are rightfully for them to determine. We hope that these provisions will encourage authorities to improve value for money by competition and example rather than by imposition.

The LGIU raised the possibility that the Audit Commission's new responsibilities would lead to accusations of it being politically partisan.⁴ This possibility had also been raised by the then Controller of the Commission Howard Davies following the publication of the White Paper: he said that "the league tables would have to be done very carefully. I hope this would not be seen as putting the Commission into a political role".⁵ The LGIU suggested that to avoid this possibility "the criteria for league table information should initially have to be agreed with local authority organisations".⁶ This requirement was not written into the legislation, but Earl Howe, speaking for the Government during the Lords Committee stage of the Local Government Bill, stated that the Audit Commission was an independent body: "we value that independent judgement from the Commission and we want to keep things that way".⁷

The Government's proposals were enacted in part I of the **Local Government Act 1992**. Under section 1 the Audit Commission (and, for Scotland, the Accounts Commission) is required to give directions to local authorities requiring them to publish information relating to their activities which will, in the Commission's opinion, facilitate the making of appropriate comparisons (by reference to the criteria of *cost, economy, efficiency and effectiveness*) between standards of performance in the relevant financial year and previous years.

³ HL Deb Vol 533, 2.12.91, c18

⁴ op cit, p3

⁵ quoted in *Local Government Chronicle*, 26.7.91

⁶ op cit

⁷ HL Deb Vol 533, 2.12.91 c36

Local authorities (including police and fire authorities) are required to collect the information which the Audit Commission asks for and must make arrangements to publish the results in a local newspaper within nine months of the end of the financial year in question. The first set of performance indicators related to the year 1993/4, so all authorities should have published their performance indicators by the end of 1994. Section 1 of the 1992 Act also contains provision designed to enable individual electors to have access to the authority's PIs.

Section 2 of the 1992 Act gives further details of the Audit Commission's direction-making power under s1. In particular, the Commission must consult such local government associations and other persons "as it thinks fit" before imposing any new requirement on local authorities. New requirements cannot be imposed later than 31st December in the financial year to which a direction relates. Section 3 requires district auditors to ensure that local authorities have carried out their duties relating to PIs. Under section 7, the Audit Commission has the power to name authorities which have failed to comply with such duties.

II The Principles Behind the Audit Commission's Approach

On 5 December 1991 the Audit Commission published a consultative paper setting out how it would approach its new responsibilities.⁸ The paper suggested that for any individual service, libraries for example, the PIs should ideally cover five features.

Performance indicators should show:

- the overall cost of the service to the taxpayer
- the amount of service provided
- the extent of the use made of it by the public
- the quality or effectiveness of the service
- its value for money.

Some services might need more indicators, others fewer, but assuming around five indicators per service, the Commission estimated that something over 200 indicators might be needed in total, or 100 for each tier in shire areas. It suggested that a few indicators "could be highlighted as 'bell-wether' indicators of overall value for money". The significance of the Commission's comments on the number of indicators was highlighted by later reports that the Commission had resisted pressure from the Government to reduce the number of PIs drastically, to single figures. The Commission apparently felt that this would give a distorted picture of local authorities' performance and would increase the danger of councils' efforts being skewed towards the services covered by the indicators, to the detriment of other services.

The consultation paper suggested that in order to help the public judge the quality and cost of the services they receive and pay for, the PIs would have to be readily understandable. As the Government wished to facilitate comparisons between authorities, the PIs would need to be "reasonably objective, and straightforward to define and measure". The Commission cautioned, however, that:

⁸ The Citizen's Charter: Local Authority Performance Indicators, Dep 7739

The danger with very simple indicators is that they may oversimplify reality, or put an excessive weight on the features of a service that happen to be easy to measure. A critical part of the task will therefore be to devise indicators that strike the best balance between these two considerations.

The Commission commented that its VFM audit work, which is separate from its performance indicators, would continue to focus on complex managerial issues. Consequently, where a choice between comprehensibility and over-simplification had to be made in the drawing up of the new PIs, "the need for indicators to be readily understood should be paramount".

The Commission acknowledged concerns that it is difficult to measure quality and effectiveness using performance indicators:

- effectiveness means how well a service meets the needs of its consumers, and policy objectives of the council. It is therefore important to know what the main concerns of consumers actually are. This may often appear to be obvious. The Commission intends to take steps to confirm that this is the case, including some original customer research.
- it is generally quite difficult to measure effectiveness and quality in ways which allow clear comparisons, or to do so by means of one or two indicators. There will often be no simple solution to this problem. A major part of the Commission's effort will be devoted to identifying the best indicators to serve this purpose, and it is here that it will need the most outside help.

Finally, the Commission acknowledged the need to minimise the cost to local authorities of compiling the information needed for the PIs. It therefore undertook to rely, wherever possible, on data that is normally collected already and to use established definitions such as CIPFA's costing guidelines.⁹ The Commission undertook to carry out pilot projects where it intended to demand information that no authorities currently collected, to ensure that the collection of such information was feasible and worthwhile.

⁹ The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy

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The Audit Commission has produced a very readable guide to the performance indicators: **Watching Their Figures**.¹⁰ This booklet is scrupulous in its warnings about the limitations of the Citizen's Charter indicators:

The indicators show what standards of service the public get in different areas. But they do not always show whether it is harder or dearer to provide certain services in some areas of the country than it is in others. Nor do they show you whether some of the circumstances which affect how councils do their job are beyond their control. [p7].

¹⁰ HMSO, 1994, available on a green form through the Vote Office

III The 1993/4 Performance Indicators

In September 1992, the Audit Commission issued a set of proposed indicators for consultation.¹¹ The list covered over 40 separate services provided by local authorities and consisted of a total of 152 indicators. The broad areas covered by the indicators were:

- education
- social services
- highways
- libraries
- consumer protection
- the police
- the fire service
- housing
- environmental services
- recreation and leisure
- environmental health
- planning
- local tax collection
- housing benefit

The consultation paper attracted over 500 responses. The Local Government Information Unit, which remains sceptical about the value of performance indicators under the current legislative framework, acknowledged that with the publication of the final version of its indicators for 1993/4 the Audit Commission appeared "to have taken serious note of local government's concerns": the final document had been "considerably altered and improved".¹² The LGIU noted that the Commission had decided to:

- focus initially on fewer services
- focus on areas which are of most general interest to citizens and for which information should be readily available
- include some indicators which ask authorities to relate performance to local standards
- give authorities maximum discretion to explain the reasons for their policies, when publishing their local performance figures
- develop the indicators and the system over time in consultation with interested

¹¹ Citizen's Charter Performance Indicators

¹² LGIU Special Briefing No 44: Top of the League - making the most of performance indicators, February 1993, p2

parties.

The final list of PIs for England and Wales for 1993/4, contained in **The Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Direction 1992**, was reduced to 77, although many of these involve multi-part questions. Indicators for highways, environmental health, trading standards and leisure and recreation services were dropped from the list. Indicators on three of these services were, however, introduced for the 1994/5 performance indicators.¹³ The categories into which the 1993/4 PIs fall are as follows:

**LOCAL AUTHORITY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 1993/4:
ENGLAND & WALES**

- A DEALING WITH THE PUBLIC
- B THE PROVISION OF HOUSING ACCOMMODATION
- C HOUSING THE HOMELESS
- D REFUSE COLLECTION
- E WASTE DISPOSAL
- F CONTROL OVER DEVELOPMENT (PLANNING)
- G THE PAYMENT OF HOUSING BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT
- H THE COLLECTION OF COUNCIL TAX
- I THE PROVISION OF AN EDUCATIONAL SERVICE
- J THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES
- K THE PROVISION OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE
- L THE MAINTENANCE OF AN ADEQUATE AND EFFICIENT POLICE FORCE
- M THE PROVISION OF FIRE SERVICES
- N THE PROVISION OF SERVICES GENERALLY

Category A includes measures of answering telephones and letters, the manner in which complaints are dealt with and the number of complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman including outcomes.

Category B, on housing, includes measures such as overall housing stock, numbers of new lettings, empty properties, response times for repairs, rent levels and performance in the collection of rent. Category C (housing the homeless) focuses on numbers of households in B&B etc. and length of time in such accommodation.

The education PIs (Category I) include education for under-5s, unfilled places in primary and secondary schools, statementing (special needs provision), number of student grants awarded

¹³ The Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Direction 1993: see section VI below

and education expenditure per pupil.

Category J (social services) includes the percentages of elderly people, people with physical and learning difficulties and people with mental health problems who are helped to live in their own homes and accommodated in residential care within the authority's area. In addition there are indicators on the number of assessments made by social services (with outcomes), the number of visits received by people being cared for in the community and the provision of equipment and respite care.

Police forces (Category L) must record response rates to 999 calls, crime rates and crime detection rates, breath testing figures, complaints received and the number of police per 1000 population.

Fire brigades (Category M) must also record 999 response rates, plus the number of rescues carried out.

Category N requires authorities to set out net expenditure per head of population for a wide range of services, plus other indicators such as capital charges, interest receipts, government grants and changes in reserves and balances per head of population. Council tax billing authorities (districts and the London and metropolitan boroughs) must set out net expenditure and income per dwelling.

The Commission states clearly that some of its indicators do not directly measure performance and are therefore not really 'performance indicators' at all:

Instead, they give background information that you can use together with indicators of performance to get a full picture of the local services you are getting. Other indicators allow local authorities some freedom in the way they interpret the indicator or target they are using.¹⁴

The performance indicators are divided by the Commission into the following categories:¹⁵

- a) ones where local authorities have to set their own targets and decide how to measure them (eg. answering the telephone);
- b) ones where local authorities are told what to measure but no target is set (eg. recycling)

¹⁴ Watching Their Figures, op cit, p13

¹⁵ Ibid

of waste);

- c) ones where local authorities are told what to measure but have to set their own targets (eg. housing repairs); and
- d) ones where local authorities are told what to measure and what the targets are (eg. planning applications by householders).

In addition there are indicators of cost, indicators of quality (eg. rubbish collection) and, as described above, indicators which merely provide background information without measuring performance as such (eg. the amount of household waste collected or the number of people over 65).

The performance indicators for 1993/4 for Scotland are similar to those in England, but a smaller range of services is covered:

**LOCAL AUTHORITY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 1993/4:
SCOTLAND**

- EDUCATION
- SOCIAL WORK
- ROADS AND LIGHTING
- POLICE
- WATER
- SEWERAGE
- HOUSING
- ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES
- PLANNING
- LEISURE AND RECREATION
- LIBRARIES

IV Interpreting the Performance Indicators

Part 2 of the Audit Commission's guide to the PIs, **Watching Their Figures**, is entitled: "Special factors to take into account when deciding whether your council is doing a good job". The first section contains the following observations:¹⁶

How much control does the council have over the way it runs its services?

In effect, the Government now limits the money each council is able to spend. Most of the council's money comes from government grants... The rest of the money the council spends is mostly raised through the council tax. But the Government now 'caps' council budgets, which has the effect of limiting the amount of council tax councils can charge.

Local authorities must provide some services by law. These are known as 'statutory services'. Local authorities can also run other services, but they do not have to provide them by law. These are known as 'non-statutory services'. But the levels of even these statutory services are not usually laid down, except for rules on particular services (for example, levels of council tax benefit)...

Within these restrictions, local authorities can decide how much they share resources between their different responsibilities, and how much council tax they charge. The way they share resources and the efficiency with which they use those resources will influence how well they do their job. For example, councils have to provide a refuse collection service, but they can decide what kinds of bins or bags they will collect and how often they will collect them. They must offer all children over five a place in school, but they can decide if they want to provide nursery schools for children under five. To get 'value for money', local authorities will aim for the best quality at the lowest cost, and higher costs should mean a better quality service. Decisions about the cost and quality of services should be made by local politicians, who are responsible to local voters. Because councils never have enough money to provide all the services their residents may want, councillors have to decide which services are a priority.

¹⁶ pp19-20

The booklet also describes some of the other general circumstances influencing the delivery of council services, including population density, social deprivation, daily or seasonal fluctuations in population, age of population, language and cultural differences, geographical differences, housing and infrastructure and regional pay and cost variations. Specific factors influencing each of the services covered by the Commission's PIs are also described on pages 24-47. For example, the commentary on category B, the provision of housing accommodation, notes that houses provided by housing associations, which are not covered by the performance indicators, now form a larger proportion of the total public rented housing stock. The Commission also describes some of the factors which influence councils' performance in the field of reletting empty homes:¹⁷

If the quality of a council's housing is poor, it may delay the time it takes to relet a property. It may also mean the council has more empty properties than other authorities. Less desirable properties are usually harder to let. The high rise housing found in inner city and urban areas is generally considered less desirable than traditional housing in rural and suburban areas. Many authorities with this 'hard to let' housing have found ways to let it quickly and successfully - for example, by letting to young single people. Where the condition of council housing is poor, more properties could be empty because they are having repairs or improvements made to them, or are awaiting these repairs. A high 'capital spend' for each property should suggest that major improvement programmes are taking place.

In areas where there is a greater demand for housing, new tenants are less likely to turn down offers of a home and properties are less likely to stay empty. But some councils offer new tenants more than one property. This means the time taken to relet a property could be longer because a property may be offered to several different tenants before it is let. So the council's policy on how many properties it offers a tenant will lengthen or lessen the time a property stays empty.

¹⁷ Ibid, p26

V Publication of the Performance Indicators

Early in 1994 the Audit Commission published guidance on how local authorities should comply with their duty to publish their 1993/4 PIs by the end of that year.¹⁸ This publication indicated that the Commission had obtained legal advice that the **Local Government Act 1992** required local authorities to publish their PIs in a newspaper which was for sale rather than a free newspaper [p7]. On 24 May 1994, in response to a PQ from Jack Straw, the Secretary of State for the Environment John Gummer gave a commitment to amend the 1992 Act "at a convenient opportunity" if necessary in order to allow publication in free newspapers.¹⁹

The Commission advised councils that there was nothing to stop publication of the PIs in their own news-sheet or magazines *in addition* to a newspaper. If they choose to do so they did not have to include every indicator or service but the Commission cautioned that "care should be taken not to choose indicators for publication in ways that might be misleading" [p13]. The Commission suggested some other ways in which councils might want to go further than the minimum requirements for the publication of PIs:²⁰

- providing further information, such as explanations of local services and policy decisions and additional local measures;
- the use of comparisons, particularly with neighbouring boroughs

The Audit Commission will publish its comparative indicators for most local authority services on 30 March 1995, with the indicators for the police and fire services to be published shortly afterwards on 12 April. It was originally planned to publish league tables of local authority performance but following consultation with local authorities the information will now be published in the form of bar charts showing the overall standards achieved by each authority set against a national average. The *Municipal Journal* reported that "the Commission will also be issuing a detailed commentary on the statistics giving its views on local authority performance along with the circumstances which should be taken into account when comparing service levels within one council with another".²¹ In Scotland, all comparative indicators will be published in a single volume. The date has not yet been fixed but it is likely to be at the end of April or early in May.

¹⁸ Read All About It, HMSO, Feb 1994

¹⁹ HC Deb Vol 244 c96W

²⁰ p7

²¹ "Commission drops league tables for new indicators" 3.2.95

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Paul Vevers, associate director of the Audit Commission, explained the Commission's approach in an article in the *Municipal Journal*:²²

For local publication, the general public needs a basket of performance indicators from which to pick out those they find the most interesting. When aggregated nationally, however, there is too much information for the public to digest. At the same time, a different section of the public - the many thousands of local consumer and interest groups - need detailed national comparisons covering services in which they are interested. To satisfy these different requirements, we proposed to produce a main report with a selection of 20 indicators, and an appendix including all the indicators.

Responses to consultation suggested, however, that highlighting only 20 indicators would be misleading and could skew resources and internal targets towards those areas at the expense of others. In addition, the Commission asked NOP to carry out a survey of public opinion to identify the most interesting topics covered by the PIs: "this survey highlighted an overwhelming interest in the police performance indicators". Consequently the Commission decided to produce not one but three main reports, each with a selection of 10 indicators:

National Publication of Local Authority Performance Indicators		
Volume 1	services common to county and metropolitan councils and London boroughs;	30.3.95
Volume 2	services common to district and metropolitan councils and London boroughs;	30.3.95
Volume 3	police and fire services.	12.4.95

Regarding the decision not to use league tables, Mr Vevers has acknowledged the danger that putting authorities into rank order would risk exaggerating small differences in performance: "the authority in position number 50 may have achieved a similar score to the authority in position number 10, but the rank order suggests a bigger difference in performance".²³ The bar charts which the Commission has decided upon instead are intended to highlight differences in performance, but Mr Vevers has stated that they will also make it clear that many authorities achieve a similar score. In addition, the Audit Commission propose to

²² "Giving an indication", 3.2.95

²³ Ibid

present all the indicators in the main report in this format, "even those indicators where views will differ widely as to whether a high score is good or bad".²⁴ This would seem to be a reference to the 'background indicators' discussed above which do not measure performance as such. Where authorities have had to set local targets for performance, the targets and the actual performance achieved will be shown side-by-side. Mr Vevers also implied in his *Municipal Journal* article that the publication of next year's PIs will be more interesting, in that year-on-year comparisons will enable the public to see how the performance of local and police authorities has changed over the course of a year.

An article in the *Local Government Chronicle* of 17.3.95 noted that the Association of Metropolitan Authorities has prepared its members for the publication of the PIs by supplying them with comparable information on government bodies, housing associations and the NHS:

The AMA hopes they will be able to use these PIs to deflect media criticism from their own performance. The statistics show, for instance, that local authorities have a lower percentage of empty housing stock than housing associations, the private sector or the government itself. Other information supplied to councils includes statistics on the Inland Revenue, the Benefits Agency and the Child Support Agency and response times for ambulance services. These last figures could be used in comparison with police and fire PIs, the AMA has said".²⁵

On 25 January 1995 the London Research Centre (the former GLC library and research facility, now funded by the London boroughs) published a book containing the performance indicators for each London borough.²⁶ The LRC document, produced with the co-operation of the two London local government associations,²⁷ deliberately avoided the use of league tables *or* bar charts. The Secretaries of the two associations John McDonnell and John Hall stated in the Preface that fears remained over the use to which the PIs would be put:

We have real concerns that the information could be misused, deliberately or accidentally, in ways which would damage services on which people depend. For example, it would be a great mistake to use the information in this volume to label any borough council as the best, or the worst, in London. Any ranking of boroughs could only be based on some of the indicators published, and so it would present a partial and misleading picture. Many equally important features of the services provided by boroughs are not

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ "AMA prepares its defence in anticipation of PI criticism"

²⁶ **Performance Indicators in London Boroughs 1993/94**

²⁷ The Association of London Authorities and the London Boroughs Association, which are to merge shortly as both associations now have Labour majorities.

measured by the indicators.

At the launch of the LRC's publication, the shadow Environment Secretary Frank Dobson said that "where the figures are comparable, there can be no excuses for authorities which provide an unacceptably low level of service".²⁸ The Labour Party's consultative document on local government, published in January 1995, states that Labour supports in principle the introduction of national indicators of performance by the Audit Commission "so that local councils and local people have a benchmark by which to judge local performance".²⁹

The *Local Government Chronicle* printed a comparative table of five key 1993/4 performance indicators for each London borough, based upon the figures brought together in the LRC document.³⁰ The *LGC's* interpretation of the results was that Hackney and Lambeth both performed badly in certain key services, but also that there were "wild fluctuations across all councils' services. And some of the Tory flagship boroughs have done less well than might have been expected". The Labour Party's local government officer David Gardner claimed that the journal had presented a selective picture of the performance of Labour boroughs: "On rent collection, far from showing Labour councils to be failing it shows them doing extremely well, with Tory Enfield getting the wooden spoon".³¹ Disputes of this kind are certain to be rife once the national comparative PIs are published. Given the sheer volume of information which is being brought together, all political parties are likely to be able to find comfort (and ammunition for their local elections campaigns) from at least some of the indicators.

²⁸ *Labour Party News Release PR 108/95* "Standards must be raised", 25.1.95

²⁹ *Renewing Democracy, Rebuilding Communities*, p.10

³⁰ "Indicators indict Labour boroughs" 27.1.95

³¹ *Local Government Chronicle* letters page, 3.2.95, "London boroughs perform well on indicators"

VI The Performance Indicators for Future Years

A. ENGLAND

Councils will have to publish performance indicators for the financial year 1994/5 locally by the end of 1995. Indicators for the following services which were dropped from the 1993/4 list were re-introduced for the financial year 1994/5:

- highways
- environmental health
- leisure and recreation services.

The 1994/5 indicators are contained in **The Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Direction 1993**. Additional changes for 1994/5 included the addition of indicators on:

- equal opportunities (under the general heading 'Dealing with the Public')
- meals on wheels
privacy in residential care
children being looked after by the council ('in care') and on the child protection register (under the 'Social Services' heading).

The 1995/6 indicators are contained in **The Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Direction 1994**. An indicator of the cost and speed of searches of the local land register (under the combined heading 'Planning and Land Searches') has been added to this set of PIs, which local authorities will have to publish by the end of 1996.

B. SCOTLAND

The performance indicators for 1994/5 and 1995/6 for Scotland are set out in the **Publication of Information (Standards of Performance) Directions** of 1993 and 1994, produced by the Accounts Commission. The most important changes are as follows:

- Social Work - the performance indicator for aids and adaptations has been removed
- Housing - an indicator on services for homeless people has been added
- Planning - indicators on planning appeals and development plans have been added.

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