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**Assessing the quality of local governance: a case study
of public services in Carrick, UK**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an intensive study of the quality of local governance in a case study area in the UK. It demonstrates how the concept of public governance can be operationalised in such a way that the performance of local agencies against public governance criteria can be assessed and their interaction can be modelled. The results of this study suggest that assessment of the quality of local governance is an area which deserves to be explored in more depth in the future and may provide important evidence which will throw very different light on the performance of the range of agencies interacting with citizens and service users at local level. In the meantime, the results of more limited, service-oriented, performance assessment systems need to be interpreted with care, given that they largely miss out on these governance dimensions.

Assessing the quality of local governance: a case study of public services in Carrick, UK

INTRODUCTION

While the literature on local governance, particularly in Western Europe and North America, is growing very fast (Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1999; John, 2001; Lynn, 2002; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Stoker, 2004), much less attention has been given to measuring its dimensions and the levels of performance associated with it in any systematic way (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2003; Mathur and Skelcher, 2006). In the UK, there have been assessments of changes in the levels of accountability (Ashworth and Skelcher, 2005; Dubnick et al, 2004), stakeholder engagement (Leach and Lowndes, 2005), partnership working (ODPM, 2006; Skelcher and Sullivan, 2002) and community leadership (Sullivan and Sweeting, 2005) but these have been at an aggregate level and these very different elements of local governance have generally not been studied in interaction with each other.

This paper reports the results of an intensive study of the quality of local governance in one case study area in the UK, namely Carrick District Council in Cornwall. It demonstrates how the concept of public governance can be operationalised in such a way that the performance of local agencies against public governance criteria can be assessed and their interaction can be modelled. It explores the implications of the findings of this study for future research into assessments of the quality of local governance..

WHAT IS ‘LOCAL GOVERNANCE’?

The definition of local governance used in this study is consistent with the definition in Bovaird and Loeffler (2003): “*the way in which local stakeholders interact with each other in order to influence the outcomes of public policies*”. This definition emphasises that governance is constituted by the interplay of structures, processes and other mechanisms (often labelled as ‘rules’) which link the networks of stakeholders together. It also suggests that there is no hard-and-fast hierarchy between these stakeholders – central government’s wishes do not necessarily prevail over those of local government – because the way in which influence processes work is often very subtle and can undermine the chains of authority which are outlined in legislation.

Compared to the NPM paradigm which dominated the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s, this perspective is much more oriented to the understanding of public decision making as a multi-stakeholder activity, not just a government activity and as a ‘fuzzy’ negotiative process rather than a set of clear and firm events (Rhodes, 1997; Kickert et al, 1997). Furthermore, local governance takes as its purpose not simply the inward-looking search for good management, but rather the achievement of those outcomes valued by external stakeholders (Bovaird, 2004).

An advantage of this definition of local governance is that it immediately operationalises measurement of the quality of local governance, suggesting a focus on two key set of achievements: improvements in the *quality of life* in the local area and improvements in the extent to which agreed *governance principles* have been honoured in the interactions between the different stakeholders in those areas, including citizens, service users, voluntary and community groups, local business, public sector service providers (public, private and third sector), local authority officials and politicians, and the local media.

Such a framework is, of course, relative – the standards embodied within it for quality of life outcomes and the quality of interaction processes are specific to the stakeholders concerned. However, this is a strength of the approach, rather than a weakness, as it means that the assessment is grounded in the values and meanings which are important to the stakeholders, rather than being imposed or second-guessed by an ‘independent’ but uninvolved and therefore potentially insensitive or out-of-touch external assessor.

Assessing quality of life outcomes. Over recent years, there has been a strong resurgence of interest around the assessment of policy outcomes. This has been partly driven by the insight that current output-oriented performance reports are of little interest to politicians, to citizens or to the media (Bennett et al, 2001). Politicians, too, are asking for evidence which will allow them to judge whether their policies have made a difference in terms of achieving desired outcomes (Nutley and Boaz, 2003). Consequently, there is now an interest in measuring the success of public interventions in terms of the quality of life changes which they bring about, rather than simply measuring the quality of the activities themselves.

The quality of life outcomes which are seen as relevant – by the public or by politicians – are likely to vary from context to context. Typically in any country, region or locality they are likely to include some or all of the following elements (Bovaird, 2004):

- Health
- Public safety and security
- Jobs and economic prosperity
- Social wellbeing and integration
- Enjoyment of leisure and culture
- Lifelong learning and human capital
- Access and mobility
- Housing comfort and shelter
- A liveable environment

It is important to note that these elements have been defined in terms of quality of life outcomes, rather than quality of service or level of service activity. Public governance does not focus on how ‘good’ the public services are but rather on whether they achieve the effects intended.

Assessing the implementation of governance principles and processes. However, the debate on whether the intended outcomes have been achieved tends to be fraught with

disagreements - this is inevitable, because it is a debate about values (political and social) as well as technical issues. Similarly, the decisions as to how these quality of life outcomes are best to be achieved are often highly contentious, even confrontational. They are therefore divisive and dysfunctional, unless they are undertaken within certain agreed rules and conventions. It is these rules, structures and processes which constitute the public governance principles which need to be established and agreed by the stakeholders within a local area. Again, the key elements within these public governance principles are likely to vary from context to context. However, we can expect that many of the following elements are likely to be important in any given context (Bovaird, 2004):

- Democratic decision-making
- Citizen and stakeholder engagement
- Transparency
- Accountability
- Social inclusion and equality (of opportunity, of use, of cost, of access or of outcomes) for disadvantaged groups
- Fair and honest treatment of citizens
- Willingness and capacity to work in partnership
- Ability to compete in a global environment
- Respect for the rule of law
- Respect for the rights of others
- Respect for diversity
- Sustainability of policies

Each of these principles is typically embedded within the national constitution (e.g. respect for the rights of others), within the legal framework (e.g. Freedom of Information Acts and equalities legislation), within formal organizational rules (such as codes of conduct) and within informal norms both of organizations (such as 'politically correct' modes of address and conversation) and of society (such as the willingness of people to take a stand against the anti-social behaviour of others, e.g. litter dropping or loud use of a mobile phone in trains). These principles are likely to apply in a wide variety of national cultures, although it is plausible that in a *Rechtstaat* the principles encoded within the constitution and legal frameworks are likely to be given comparatively greater weight than principles derived from other sources.

Consequently, the assessment of the quality of public governance can be resolved into a series of assessments of how well each of the key quality of life elements have been achieved and how far each of the key governance principles have been honoured in the interactions between the different stakeholders. This clearly involves judgments based on values - first, the judgments made by stakeholders on each of the elements above and, secondly, judgments on how to aggregate all these views into a final 'governance scorecard'. While values are central to assessing the quality of local governance, this does not mean that the process is 'entirely subjective'. Rather it is a process of 'structured and explicated' subjectivity, which can be analysed and, therefore, contested in debate. The way in which this debate is conducted itself needs to be consistent with the 'rules of engagement' built into the governance principles.

While the structuring and explication of subjectivity is always likely to seem rather ‘soft’ and ‘fuzzy’ to accountants, auditors and external inspectors, it is an essential part of good management and good governance. The assessment of the quality of governance is therefore never likely to be as routinised as the assessment of service efficiency, nor as amenable to a ‘tick box’ checklist approach. This does not mean that it is ‘less valid’, only that it is different in kind from the evaluation framework built into NPM. However, conceptual validity is only half the battle. It is also important to explore whether the information which emerges from such a process might be practically useful. The case study reported below allows the significance of these types of information to be explored with the key local stakeholders themselves.

CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY: PUBLIC SERVICES IN CARRICK HOUSING ESTATES

The case study investigated the quality of local governance in social housing estates in Carrick district council – these provide housing for about a quarter of the population of the district and tend to be large and relatively socially homogenous (Bovaird and Owen, 2002). They were originally in the ownership of Carrick District Council but since the ‘right to buy’ legislation under the Thatcher administration an increasing number have become owner-occupied and, since 2003, the ownership of the remaining houses has been transferred to an ‘arm’s-length housing company’, Carrick Housing Limited (which commissioned the empirical research reported here). This company has a board on which tenant representatives form 50%, together with councillors from Carrick District Council, the Chief Executive and executive directors and two independent non-executive directors.

Further organisations providing services on the housing estates include Cornwall County Council (including education, social care, highways and transportation, strategic land use planning, community development, economic development and tourism), the District Council (including housing strategy, environmental protection, environmental health, leisure services, local planning and development control, community development, economic development and tourism), a large number of town and parish councils (principally involved in services related to the street scene, local village halls and recreation grounds), Cornwall and Devon Policy Authority, Cornwall and Devon Fire Authority, the Primary Health Care Trust, several hospitals inside and outside the Carrick area, the Learning and Skills Council and a large variety of voluntary sector organisations (some national in their scale, others local or regional) and community groups.

METHODOLOGY

The definition of local governance adopted in this research led us to use a research methodology – the *Governance International* Governance Test - which allowed a governance scorecard to be compiled, based on multi-stakeholder assessments. This governance scorecard has many of the attributes suggested in earlier conceptual work

(Bovaird and Halachmi, 1998; Bovaird et al, 2003), which showed the affinities between this approach and the community scorecard approaches in US and UK local agencies (e.g. Martin et al, 2004; Farrant et al, 2004).

The methodology allowed the measurement of the gap between what local stakeholders expected and the performance of local agencies, both in terms of *quality of life* (against four key dimensions, namely liveable environment, community safety, health, social well-being and disability issues, and education and training) and *principles of public governance* (including transparency, partnership working, sustainability and honest and fair behaviour). These dimensions of quality of life and principles of governance were selected in discussions with the Board of Carrick Housing – other dimensions of quality of life and principles of governance were believed to be lower priority at this stage in the development of local governance in the areas concerned. (Subsequent discussions with different stakeholder groups largely confirmed this view).

The project methodology involved a large number of focus groups with all of the relevant stakeholder groups, together with short questionnaires completed by all participants. Background documentation from local agencies was also analysed and interviews were held with a range of key people in the area, including representatives of community groups and staff in public sector provider and commissioning organisations.

Separate focus groups were undertaken with each of the following stakeholders:

- community and voluntary groups and independent sector
- private contractors who work with Carrick Housing
- local businesses (including firms employing people living on Carrick Housing estates)
- local press and broadcasting media
- Carrick District Council officers and councillors (including council ‘contractors’)
- officials from other local public sector organisations (Primary Health Care Trust, Cornwall County Council Social Services, Occupational Therapy, Local Education Authority, local schools, etc)
- Board members of Carrick Housing (two groups)
- staff members of Carrick Housing
- three specific tenant groups, including separate focus groups with:
 - people with disabilities and caring responsibilities
 - young people
 - young families

These represented all the key partners and stakeholders of Carrick Housing, including a wide range of social group amongst tenants and residents. It was decided not to include a black and minority ethnic focus group, as Carrick Housing had recently already undertaken a focus group and a number of other activities with this social group.

In each focus group, the primary discussed centred around one quality of life issue and one governance principle, in each case chosen because it was seen as likely to be particularly relevant to that focus group. However, the questionnaires filled in by each participant and the general discussion which rounded up each focus group allowed

participants to provide a short summary of their views on other quality of life dimensions and other governance principles.

Four key questions were addressed to each focus group in relation to the two topics which were discussed in that session:

- The current STATE (e.g. “How safe do you feel on your estate?”)
- the TREND (e.g. “Has safety on this estate improved or got worse in the last year or so?”)
- PROPOSALS (e.g. “What do you think communities and organisations in your area can do to deal with identified community safety problems and to build on existing strengths?”)
- COMMITMENT of participants (“What would YOU be prepared to do in order to help these proposals to get implemented?”)

This methodology clearly exposed the underlying public governance issues at local level, including both the ways in which public services could make a greater contribution to increasing the quality of life of local residents and the ways in which local organisations and public agencies could work together more successfully in co-production to impact upon the local quality of life. Moreover, the multi-stakeholder assessment process both provided greater insights into the measurement of performance than is available from most measurement approaches and also served to bring the stakeholders into the process in such a way as to increase their commitment to find solutions to the governance problems identified.

FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

The feedback from the discussion groups has been presented in the form of a '*governance balanced scorecard*'. Table 1 shows the 'traffic lights' with regard to the current situation on Carrick housing estates and Table 2 refers to the trends perceived by the focus groups. Taken together, the tables therefore present a picture of how different organisations and groups view the current state and development of public services on Carrick Housing estates. They therefore reflect the performance levels of the whole range of agencies and stakeholders working on the estates, not just Carrick Housing.

Evaluation of the Current Situation

As Table 1 shows, most traffic lights are either green – which means the discussion group was positive - or yellow, which means that the discussion groups evaluated the service providers on Carrick Housing estates to be neither strong nor weak in a specific area (or, in a few cases) that there was disagreement between focus group members). In particular, most focus groups were satisfied with the quality of the housing stock and the quality of housing services on the estates. Nevertheless, the 'yellow traffic lights' showed that there was still considerable scope for improvement. Moreover, in many cases the good practices which led to the green lights needed to be rolled out across more of the estates.

Table 1: The perception of different groups of the current situation with regard to quality of life and governance issues on Carrick Housing estates

		Discussion Groups								
		1	2	3	4	5				
Quality of Life Issues										
Liveable Environment: quality of housing	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District officers		Public officials	
Liveable Environment: quality of housing services	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District officers		Public officials	
Liveable Environment: quality of surroundings	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District officers		Public officials	
Community safety	Young families		Media							
Health, social well-being and disability issues	Disab. Tenants		Board members							
Education and Training	Young People		Business							
Governance Principles										
Transparency	Young families		Board members		Media					
Partnership working	Carrick Housing staff		Board members		Public officials		Voluntary groups			
Sustainability	Carrick District officers		Young people							
Honest and fair behaviour	Disab. Tenants		Private contractors		Business					

Key to the 'traffic light system'

Present situation



Weak area

The majority of the participants think that there is a serious problem.



Reasonable

The majority of participants think that Carrick Housing estates are neither strong nor weak in this area.



Strong Area

The majority of participants thinks that Carrick Housing estates have a strength in this area.

Table 2: The perception of different groups of the trend over time with regard to quality of life and governance issues on Carrick Housing estates

		Discussion Groups								
		1	2	3	4	5				
Quality of Life Issues										
Liveable Environment: quality of housing	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District Officers		Public Officials	
Liveable Environment: quality of housing services	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District Officers		Public Officials	
Liveable Environment: quality of surroundings	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Voluntary groups		Carrick District Officers		Public Officials	
Community safety	Young families		Media							
Health, social well-being and disability issues	Disab. Tenants		Board members							
Education and Training	Young People		Business							
Governance Principles										
Transparency	Young families		Board members		Media					
Partnership working	Carrick Housing Staff		Board members		Public Officials		Voluntary groups			
Sustainability	Carrick District Officers		Young people							
Honest and fair behaviour	Disab. Tenants		Private contractors		Business					

Key to the 'traffic light system'

Trends

- Getting worse** The majority of participants believe that the problems in this area are getting worse.
- Stable** The majority of participants believe that the problems in this area are unchanged.
- Improving** The majority of participants believe that the problems in this area are getting better.

The views of the different groups on specific issues were largely overlapping, particularly on health, social well-being and disability issues, education and training, partnership working, honest and fair behaviour. Although crime was not considered to be an issue by any focus group, one key problem which emerged in every discussion group was anti-social behaviour. This problem, which was directly treated under the community safety topic, also came up frequently as a key issue in the quality of the liveable environment and in discussions of the other topics.

Evaluation of trends

Table 2 has more ‘green lights’ than Table 1, showing that most discussion groups have a positive view that things are improving. This positive view of the future even holds true in those issues, such as the quality of the surroundings of the estate (under the ‘liveable environment’ heading) about which focus groups are currently most concerned. (This is in contrast to the usual picture in Governance Tests that have taken place in other areas, where the assessment of trends has often been much more pessimistic (Bovaird, 2004). It is also striking that there is only one red light, in the area of education and training.

Priorities for Action

When we bring together the diagnosis of the current situation and the perceived trends, the areas which appear most in need of urgent action are those with red lights:

- **Education and Training.** Both the young people’s focus group and local employers emphasised how poorly qualified young people are for employment when they leave school. Action here must be taken primarily by the local education authority, the schools, the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions.
- **Sustainability.** The red light here came from the frustration of young people about the lack of sustainable policies to improve their quality of life, particularly in terms of the lack of positive things for them to do on their estates, the lack of appropriate meeting places, the hostile attitudes to them of many estate residents (especially older people), and the lack of preparation and support they believed they would get when looking for a decent job. This is clearly an issue which needs to be dealt with urgently by all partners to the community strategy.

Suggestions for improvement in local governance

A rich variety of suggestions for improvement emerged from the focus groups. Some were entirely new, others were existing ‘good practices’ which deserved to be rolled out more widely across the estates. They were all initiatives to which some participants were personally willing to make a commitment, in terms of being willing to work with others to try out new approaches to improving quality of life on the estates. They included:

- Reducing anti-social behaviour
 - Improving interactions between tenants and residents on all estates, e.g. through promoting street parties, organising regular receptions for newcomers, and reviving former traditions and popular events, such as the Old Hill Halloween party and Truro Carnival.

- Encouraging strong tenants' associations on more estates.
 - Improving inter-generational living together, e.g. through projects which arrange for young people from the community to act as IT coaches for disadvantaged elderly people, Cookery Club projects which promote healthy eating and contact between generations, and arranging for gardening volunteers, ideally through the schools, to help elderly people who are no longer able to look after their own gardens,.
 - Getting young people and children more involved in what happens on their estate, e.g. holiday programmes of active sports, designing and building youth shelters on the estates and arts-based fun days.
 - Dealing with persistent troublemakers, if necessary by eviction, and a zero tolerance strategy, monitored by residents themselves.
- Improving the way Carrick Housing works with its partners, e.g. through:
 - Tackling the currently poor relationship with county social services.
 - Ensuring that partnership working with the police works well on all estates, rather than in just some.
 - Holding annual estate 'walkabouts' with partners on all estates.
 - Holding regular contractor forums to encourage contractors to play a more active role in design of maintenance and improvement works.
 - Liaising more closely with credit unions and the CAB to help tenants to tackle the high levels of debt which they are facing.
 - More joint training of staff with Carrick District Council.
 - More media training for local public agencies to improve the media's ability to work with public services to mutual advantage.
 - More devolved neighbourhood management, based on partnership groups within each locality, focussing particularly on cross-cutting issues such as anti-social behaviour.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

This research has explored stakeholder perceptions of different dimensions of quality of life and the extent to which governance principles have been honoured by the other stakeholders with whom they interact. What we have reported so far keeps each of these elements of local governance separate and distinct.

Of course, in practice, it is clear that these elements interact with each other in complex ways. What is more, the perceptions of stakeholders are clearly influenced by the quality of services which they experience or to which they seek to gain access. The interaction between these different variables has traditionally been very hard to model and to test (Cowell and Bovaird, 2005).

In the Carrick study, there were clear patterns linking different stakeholders to specific governance principles. No stakeholders appeared to be interested in all of the government principles in the study –themselves only a subset of all the potential governance principles which might have been chosen, as outlined above. It was clear, for example, that the media were interested mainly in transparency and had no consistent interest in any of the other governance principles (although they were always ready to seize on stories where stakeholders felt they had a grievance when some governance principles had not been honoured by others). While practice elsewhere had demonstrated that it can be particularly difficult to get any stakeholder group openly to discuss ‘honest and fair dealing’ (Bovaird, 2004), the contractors group at Carrick did tackle this issue in depth (but other groups, once again, appeared to have little interest in it). However, this may have been largely because most of these contractors were in the construction industry, working on repair and maintenance programmes for Carrick Housing – a sector which is notoriously subject to problematic ethical conduct. Sustainability of policy was important to each of the three citizen focus groups (although they did not discuss their concerns using this explicit phrase, often preferring to use terms such as ‘things not adding up’ or ‘inconsistency’). Partnership working was not an issue of interest to any of the citizens focus groups but certainly was an active concern for all the focus groups which contained formal organisations – this is predictable, given that almost all of these groups either had entered into some sort of partnership with public bodies in the area or had been invited to do so. The only governance principle which was easy to broach with all stakeholder focus groups was ‘stakeholder engagement’ – not surprisingly, given that this issue was being raised in a research project which was, in itself, partly a stakeholder engagement exercise.

There were also very strong interactions between quality of life issues, particularly for the citizen focus groups. Indeed, the discussion in these groups often moved quickly between issues of ‘liveability’ in the neighbourhood, community safety, health and social wellbeing. It was clear that, for many citizens participating in the focus groups, the concepts of ‘social wellbeing’, ‘community safety’ and ‘liveability’ were very intertwined, so that they found it difficult to distinguish clearly between them. The implication of this, in methodological terms, is that it will be important in future to find more aggregate questions, either to substitute for these separate ‘quality of life’ dimensions or to complement them, so that it is no longer necessary to ask citizens to engage in differentiations which seem artificial to them. There are a number of different ways in which this might be done but they essentially fall into two categories – those which report ‘intrinsic’ judgements by stakeholders about their own subjective state (e.g. ‘satisfaction’ with their quality of life, ‘happiness’ or ‘contentment’ with their current state or perception of their area as a place in which to live and work), and those which report ‘extrinsic’ judgements about others (e.g. their level of trust or confidence in their neighbours, local politicians or officials or local organisations).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE RESEARCH

The findings outlined above relate to just one case study area. However, they can be compared to findings from Governance Tests previously undertaken in four very different types of municipalities in four different European countries (Bovaird, 2004). We highlight here a number of lessons which we would like to suggest may have wider significance than in these five case studies alone.

The first clear lesson is that the performance measurement drive in central government in the UK has missed some important governance dimensions. This is particularly evident in initiatives such as the CPA in local government and the 'star ratings' in the NHS. Such approaches are very service-improvement oriented (although the 'Harder Test' in the CPA from 2005 onwards has tried to incorporate more governance aspects). If it is believed – as the UK government appears strongly to believe – that 'you get what you measure' – then this suggests that Whitehall is giving much more priority to service improvement than to governance concerns. This is perhaps understandable in the short term, given the media attention to failures to reach service targets – attention which is fuelled, of course, by the reports released by government itself, and by inspection and audit bodies. In the long term, experience suggests that performance targeting leads to performance improvement 'short cuts' that eventually rebound on their inventors. If governance is to be given proper weight, then performance assessment procedures must assess the quality of governance as well as the quality of services. Community scorecard approaches, such as the Governance Test, offer a more balanced approach. It was apparent in many focus group discussions that participants had real concerns about the extent to which the outcomes they experienced in areas such as 'liveability', community safety and social wellbeing were being addressed by the separate service providers with whom they interacted. Often they were quite hazy about which organisations lay behind service provision – and had little interest in knowing such detail – but were very clear about how more could be done to improve their quality of life in a range of ways.

Secondly, the performance measurement processes currently imposed by government may be leading to serious misunderstanding of the local governance achievements of the agencies assessed. In a period when multi-stakeholder and multi-objective management is being posed as the central task of organisational leaders in the private sector, it is strange to find the guardians of the public sector driving for 'bottom-line' assessments of public service organisations, as in the CPA and 'star ratings', which hide rather than expose the differential outcomes achieved by those agencies for different stakeholder groups and which also obscure the differing views of key stakeholder groups on those agencies. Community scorecard approaches support a much more sophisticated interest by the public in specific issues and services, rather than presenting them with one 'catch-all' rating which is expected to influence either their voting behaviour or their activism to 'get them to change'. Given the haziness in most people's minds about who 'they' are and how their responsibilities are divided up, it seems enormously optimistic to think that these simple organisational ratings will resonate in any way with local people.

Finally, the experience of the Health Checks suggests that performance reporting in the public domain needs to be more appropriate for the multi-stakeholder environments which are now common. In particular, it should:

- report separately the views of all key stakeholders (360° assessments);
- report separately on service performance and the quality of governance;
- report separately on an appropriate range of achievements, including a balanced portfolio of indicators, not just those which are easy to measure and straightforward to interpret;
- report on the quality of life outcomes experienced by different stakeholders (including both geographically-based groups and groups which represent 'communities of interest') as well as their experiences with public services, in order to identify how services relate to the wellbeing of those stakeholders;
- report on the how quality of life outcomes and service quality differ between geographical communities, in order to highlight the policy choices which need to be made at neighbourhood levels, which may often be quite different;
- report on how well public agencies are implementing the public governance principles to which they have signed up.

While these suggestions have emerged specifically from the UK context, it is likely that they also have wider significance. The role of multiple stakeholders in shaping the nature of local governance and trends within it is now widely recognised in many countries. However, attempts to ensure that all relevant stakeholders get the chance to have their views systematically recorded and clearly reported during the policy making process are still meeting with very limited success. The recent movement by some international agencies to find ways of assessing the quality of governance has evidenced concern to reverse this pattern (World Bank, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Performance measurement in the public sector has so far focused on service quality and efficiency. For citizens, however, the more important issues are how well local agencies contribute to improving quality of life and how well they conform to 'good governance' principles such as transparency, consultation and fairness. For partners, the willingness of others to work in partnership is critical. The Governance Test undertaken in Carrick allowed assessment of both these aspects of the quality of local governance. A strength of the methodology was that it generated practical ideas for intervention and demonstrated the level of local support for such initiatives, with evidence on which stakeholders were prepared to put in their own resources (e.g. volunteering time) to implement them.

The results of this study suggest that assessment of the quality of local governance is an area which deserves to be explored in more depth in the future and may provide important evidence which will throw very a different light on the performance of the range of agencies interacting with citizens and service users at local level. In the meantime, the results of more limited, service-oriented, performance assessment systems need to be interpreted with care, given that they largely miss out on these governance dimensions.

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