

PROBE for Public Service

“Public Sector bodies cannot work in isolation and it is tools like PROBE that can provide the setting for the transfer of best practice, be it from the private sector or through the involvement of staff from other agencies where this specific knowledge and experience reflect broader central Government objectives for the sector”

*Peter Faill
District of Easington
Council*

A Case Study of Easington District Council

Easington District Council is located in the North East of England with a population of just under 100,000. Easington is a lively and positive district council that has fixed its sights on modernisation and great strides have been made over the last few years in setting an ambitious agenda for change. They were one of the first public service organisations to use PROBE Best Practice Benchmarking tools, and have continued to use them regularly since the late 1990s. The Council has provided valuable assistance in ensuring that the version of PROBE tailored for local councils and other similar organisations - *PROBE for Public Service* - reflects the needs of the public sector, and that its concepts and measures are challenging and relevant.



Public Service Organisational Improvement

Central Governments are always on the look out for mechanisms to drive improvements in local authorities and other public service organisations. These may not be profit driven environments, but the concepts that have been shown to improve private companies, such as the EFQM Excellence Model and the ISO series, are equally applicable in improving public services.

“The old saying ‘If you always do what you have always done you will always get what you’ve always got’ is as relevant today as ever in the public sector. There is a growing realisation within local authorities that benchmarking with other local authorities will not provide the necessary cultural shift required to improve performance”

*- Peter Faill
Strategic Procurement Manager*

The PROBE tool has been specifically tailored to the needs of the Public Service Sector and takes into account all of the drivers behind organisational excellence. It focuses on key areas of practice and performance and enables easy comparison with numerous public and private organisations already present in the PROBE database.

Who is the Customer?

A critical component of organisational excellence, as defined by London Business School's world class excellence model that underpins *PROBE for Public Service*, is knowing who your key customers and stakeholders are and managing interaction with them in order to boost overall performance.

“It is very important to define all the key stakeholders for public sector organisations. This is a far more complex process in the public sector than other organisations, but these stakeholders might include Primary/Secondary Customers, Internal/External Customers, Suppliers, Partners & Controllers.

PROBE is equally effective in helping organisations understand and further develop their relationships with all of these groups”

*- Peter Faill
Strategic Procurement Manager*

Team Building and Corporate 'Buy-in'

Getting corporate buy-in to organisational improvement is a critical part of ensuring that the necessary cultural changes can be made and maintained within both private and public sector businesses. The feeling of ownership by employees leads directly to improved implementation and belief in

the changes being made and this is catered for in the PROBE process by using a cross functional team and differing levels of seniority to generate the self assessment results in the PROBE workshops.

“To get corporate 'buy-in' and to develop an appetite for change it is really important to get the team dynamics right. An organisation needs to involve all of its people at all levels and the PROBE process is ideal in ensuring that a wide range of views from within the organisation are heard when developing the improvement plan.”

*- Peter Faill
Strategic Procurement Manager*

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The PROBE Process

The PROBE process is split into 3 key stages:

Stage 1:

A benchmarking workshop where a facilitator takes the cross functional team through the benchmarking questionnaire ensuring that consensus is reached on each question., and that learning opportunities are exploited.

Stage 2:

Immediately following this session feedback is provided about the performance of the organisation relative to others in the world class database and, importantly, about the practices that underpin that performance.

Stage 3:

The facilitator supports the team through an action planning session where identified strengths and weaknesses are turned into actions, responsibilities and deadlines.

How it worked at Easington

The PROBE team that Easington District Council brought together was a multi-professional group representing the full scope of their activities. The team spent some time discussing the questionnaire before they came together for the main session with the external PROBE facilitator.

This is probably the single strongest element of the process - the opportunity to bring together a diverse group of people, managers and representatives from all areas of the organisation, to debate the questions and challenge the way things are currently done, particularly in areas such as communication, leadership,

people management, and customer feedback.

The facilitator guided the team through to consensus about how they rated the current practices and performance. As soon as this process was complete, the facilitator analysed the data and immediately fed back a profile of how Easington District Council measured up to an holistic model of organisational excellence.

The team also learned how their practices and performance compared with those of the large numbers of other organisations that have completed the PROBE assessment process.

As well as an overall analysis, the feedback was broken down into key areas of practice and performance: the leadership, the processes, the people, the results and so on. The immediacy of the feedback gave the team a quick and effective means of identifying opportunities for improvement.

Following the benchmarking session the Easington team attended an Action Planning session with their PROBE facilitator. This helped them to turn their PROBE results into practical improvement steps for the whole Council.

"We used PROBE for Public Service as one of a range of tools to review the value for money being provided by our support services. I feel the PROBE added strength to the process in various ways, including:

- ***independent facilitation***
- ***opportunity to benchmark across sectors***
- ***ability to gain a quick, broad brush insight into services across a number of dimensions***
- ***and perhaps most important of all, the opportunity to get a cross section of people from our teams involved in assessing themselves and debating service quality - very much a tool for doing "with" not doing "to", which is very important to us."***

Joy Brindle
Assistant Chief Executive
District of Easington Council

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