

SERVICES WITH A SMILE

As the third largest local authority in Scotland, Fife Council plays a crucial role in supporting the local economy and business sector and in developing partnerships with other bodies. Business improvement team leader Philo Wood describes how the Excellence Model proved to be a unique tool for measuring the council's performance



Fife Council was set up in 1996 as part of the reorganisation of local government in Scotland. It brought together the three former district councils, the regional council and the Glenrothes Development Corporation: a considerable challenge to bring five into one. Fife Council is now the third largest local authority in Scotland, serving a population of 349,429 people spread over a wide geographical area, which has a mix of urban and rural communities.

The council employs 21,539 people, excluding casual workers, and is responsible for all local authority functions, including education and social work. There are 17 discrete services, with a wide range of customers and client groups. It is estimated that about 900 different services are provided to residents and visitors. Fife has the advantage of common boundaries between the council, Fife NHS, Fife Con-

stabulary, Scottish Enterprise Fife and the Tourist Board. This helps joint planning through the development of strong relationships.

Fife community plan has set out the vision of Fife Council and its partners for the next ten years: to deliver an inclusive Fife, a sustainable Fife and best value for Fife. The community plan is translated into priorities for Fife Council in the council improvement plan, which is underpinned by the core values of people, partnership and performance. The Excellence Model is seen as an approach which will help achieve the Council's goals.

AT THE START

The development of assessment using the Model started in the classic way, with a trial run within the council's senior management team, which carried out a self-assessment in 1997 as part of the annual corporate review. A num-



Philo Wood is business improvement team leader, within the policy and organisational development service of Fife Council. Her current remit is to support the continuous improvement of business processes and systems within the council. A trained assessor, she was instrumental in introducing the Excellence Model to the council in 1997 and has been responsible for its development since then.

ber of pioneering spirits among the heads of service piloted the use of the Model with their service management teams. The policy planning and review team - within the Corporate Policy Service - were trained as EFQM assessors and facilitated these early assessment workshops, which were essentially perception-based.

In 1999, Douglas Sinclair was appointed CEO and gave the impetus for that quantum leap from ad hoc assessment (done mostly at senior management level) to a systematic programme of service reviews, which would give a comprehensive picture of how individual services were performing at that time.

The approach sought needed to be robust, with some degree of external challenge, but also flexible to suit the diversity and complexity of the council. In 2000, the council brought in external consultants to

help design a method of assessment which would provide a consistent and results-focused platform to drive continuous improvement.

TWO APPROACHES

The approach has been developed over the last four years and has been reviewed and refined in the light of lessons learned. The programme now consists of two types of assessment. A two-day facilitated self-assessment workshop with management teams continues to be used. This type of assessment is usually undertaken as an introduction to the use of the Model or in interim years as a top-up assessment. It has been adapted to take in groups of middle managers and team leaders.

The bedrock of the council's assessment programme is an evidence-based approach that is a hybrid of the award assessment process, but without the written

submission. This type of assessment is carried out over a period of five or ten days, depending on the size of the service, by a cross-service team of trained assessors led by an assessor external to the service. Most of the lead assessors have now undergone assessed training. This brings objectivity and challenge to the process.

The process itself consists of evaluation of key documents which shows what the organisation is actually achieving for its customers, its people, society and in relation to its own goals and objectives. Senior managers are then interviewed individually, the questions covering all five of the enablers, with a particular focus on leadership, policy and strategy.

Managers with special responsibilities, for example for IT or HR, are interviewed in more detail about their special remits. The assessors work down the service, interview-

0/1
6
p 313

ing middle managers, team leaders and supervisors, covering all the enablers and layering in more detail about how things work at the operational level and testing deployment. Finally, focus groups made up of representative samples of frontline employees are held, to gather their perceptions of how well the service is working, and to find out how people on the front-line are supported to do their jobs, involved and empowered to improve the service.

The assessors collate their findings and reach consensus about strengths and areas for improvement and agree a score. A report goes back to the head of service within ten working days, highlighting key themes in its summary. The service management team is then required to prioritise areas for action and to produce an EFQM improvement plan, which is seen as a core component of its service improvement plan.

MAINSTREAMING EXCELLENCE

As with any corporate initiative, scepticism and resistance must be overcome. The challenge has been to build understanding and acceptance over time. The development of the use of the Model and its successful integration into

existing management processes has taken effort and perseverance. Senior management has unwaveringly supported the use of the Model and has made the necessary resources available for development activities, training and assessment. This support has been critical through a time of external and internal pressures, uncertainty, change and reducing budgets. It was recognised that excellence is a journey and that it would take time to realise the benefits.

Another factor in the council's success with the Model has been to build assessment into the corporate and service planning cycle, so that service managers do not see it as an added burden but the framework within which they review progress. Services are now required to undertake an external assessment every three years and a rolling programme has been established, with services starting to come through for their second assessments.

An assessment 'menu' is currently being developed, which will allow services flexibility in the interim years in how they review their progress, within the framework of the Model. Questionnaires have been piloted in some services and assessment software is being evaluated. Assessment workbooks and support materials have been designed in-house, which translate the language of the Model into local government 'speak'. This also helps to track the deployment of major corporate initiatives, such as the attendance management policy and employee development process.

SHARING NEW HORIZONS

The council has invested considerable resources in training assessors and every service has at least one assessor in-house to support internal assessment. The corporate assessment pool now has about 40 fully trained people drawn from all

services. Assessor competences and a more formal development programme is currently being prepared for 2005.

One of the additional benefits of the excellence programme has been the opportunity for assessors from different services to get together to widen their horizons and to share good practice. The Roads engineer can benefit from seeing how things are done in the Housing Service and vice versa.

This year saw services undertake their second external assessments. The Education Service, which had been one of the pilots in 2000, saw its benchmark score move up and could evidence improvements made in key areas. The Housing, Local Office Network and Building Services, which have to work in close partnership, are undertaking integrated second assessments, with a core team of assessors from all three services assessing across the three organisations. They will carry out joint action planning to look at how they can improve the end-to-end delivery of the Housing Service to tenants in Fife.

The task ahead, in what is seen as phase two of the initiative, is ensuring that improvements can be measured more effectively. The local government's Achilles heel is the lack of hard performance data as defined by the Model. The priority for 2005 is to develop more robust and balanced measurement.

The journey towards excellence is a continuum but the use of the Model has given Fife Council a structured and consistent approach to help it on this journey. The aim is that in another two to three years the principles of excellence will have become absorbed so well that people will no longer talk about the Model but just see excellence as the way the council does business ■

