



# Standards of Evidence for Assessing Public Service Performance



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## Background

Standards of evidence for assessing public service performance are important for accountability to a range of stakeholders including managers, politicians, citizens and users. Standards set what is deemed relevant and acceptable evidence, and how this evidence should be used in giving accounts of performance and taking responsibility for it.

Insights from statistics, philosophy, law and social science provide frameworks to evaluate current practice in England. I used the example of the Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA) of local government to evaluate standards of evidence for the accountability of these organisations.

## Aims

The aims of this study were:

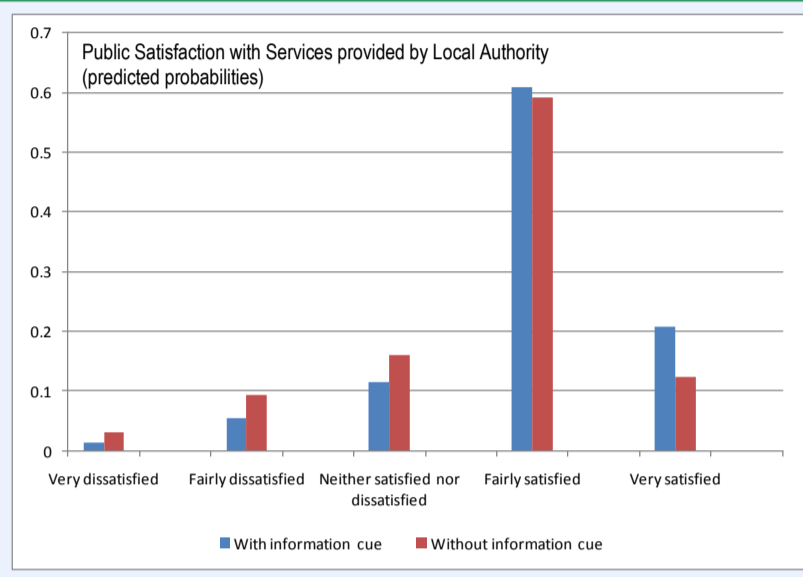
- ❖ To develop standards of evidence for the accountability of public service performance to stakeholders drawing on insights from projects in the ESRC Public Services Programme and broader literature;
- ❖ To evaluate the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime for English local government using these standards; and
- ❖ To assess the contribution of public information about the performance of local government contained in CPA in the accountability of these bodies to local citizens.

## What I Did

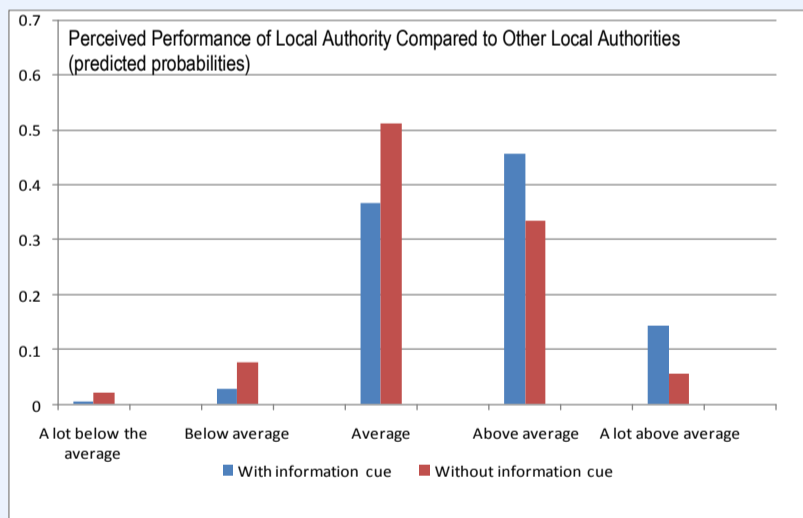
- ❖ For this project, I drew together research from the ESRC Public Services Programme and undertook new empirical work on the use of evidence for accountability by citizens.
- ❖ A special issue of the journal Evaluation (Sage) drawing on Programme projects was edited and papers and presentations on frameworks of standards of evidence were produced.
- ❖ New empirical work using field experiments was undertaken to examine the influence of information from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime on citizens' attitudes and behaviour towards public services.

## Findings

- ❖ Standards of evidence for accountability were identified including standards for: performance measurement; aggregation of measures in composites; data analysis; presentation and communication; allocation of responsibility to public managers.
- ❖ An evaluation of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime using these standards found that stakeholders risk being fooled into holding managers responsible for performance outcomes not of their making. CPA capacity measures partially capture responsibility although standards for auditor and inspector judgement are less explicit than statistical standards for quantitative measures.
- ❖ Faced with evidence from the CPA of 'good performance' of their Local Authority, citizens expressed greater satisfaction (Figure 1) and better perceived performance (Figure 2) but their political behaviour was more resistant; their existing views influenced their response to new information.



**Figure 1:** Citizens given an 'information cue' of a Comprehensive Performance Assessment that their Local Authority was relatively good, were more likely to report high satisfaction with the Authority than citizens in a control group that was not given this cue.



**Figure 2:** When respondents were given an 'information cue' that the Local Authority's performance was good, they perceived the performance of the Local Authority as better than did a control group that was given no information cue.

### Notes to figures

Respondents were randomly allocated to the 'cue' and 'no cue' groups. All differences between 'cue' and 'no cue' groups were significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.

Find out more...



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