

Benefits of measuring parks' performance



By **Chris Rutherford**

Benchmarking of parks has been available through the Yardstick project for six years in NZ and two years in Australia. The 2006 report has recently been released with some significant outcomes.

Yardstick over the past few years has assisted organisations measure their performance and levels of service against other similar organisations.

Bill Steans, Parks and Recreation Manager, Timaru District Council NZ commented that "Yardstick has provided useful information to enable a gap analysis to be carried out of our asset management procedures. ... This analysis was then used to produce an improvement plan and justify necessary resourcing requirements."

Yardstick Parks provides a means of recording quantitative and cost information relating to the provision of parks. ParkCheck, a user intercept survey, provides the qualitative information identifying what the users think about the assets provided and the quality of maintenance.

The national benchmarking project is now also extending to benchmarking of pools.

Organisations have been able to identify where provision is out of line with 'the norm' in an industry where there are few national standards in terms of provision and operation. Yardstick enables organisations to undertake the difficult task of identifying what is good practice and appropriate levels of service.

In Canberra the information has been used in a number of ways to justify, from an independent perspective, that the organisation is looking wider than its own boundaries at how it might improve its performance in some areas - and where it can share ideas and concepts with other parks organisations.

Ian Baird, Senior Policy Officer, Department of Territory and Municipal Services noted that Yardstick information enabled Parks Conservation and Lands to show that it was striving for 'best practice' when the government's agency for Procurement Solution commissioned the ACT Planning and Land Authority's City Maintenance Audit Project.

He said "that as part of this audit we were required to identify if and how we had compared our organisation against similar organisations. Yardstick not only provided a tool for this purpose but the element of independence it offers, and now significant membership, provided a real benchmark information in an open report".

Canberra Urban Parks and Places was one of the first members in Australia and has been pleased to see the project grow quickly. There are now 25 Australian members and 50 in New Zealand.

Organisations are listed in population size order. Members are then able to not only identify similar type organisations by name but also by demographic. In areas where information has been collected for some years, ongoing comparison of cost is made. With Australian members results displayed in both A\$ and NZ\$ it simplifies the comparisons across the Tasman Sea.

Comparison of cost per 1000 people (extract 1) as well as cost per hectare makes for interesting discussion. Of course appropriate comparisons need to be made with similar urban or rural organisations.

Asset management practice

The Yardstick Parks project measures compliance and approaches to good asset management practices. At a high level it is interesting to note, that while adopted asset management plans for parks and community assets are essentially a requirement in NZ, and good practice in Australia, there are still many organisations which have not achieved this milestone.

In 2006 the buildings category (Table 2) indicated that 42% have adopted asset management plans for buildings while 25% had plans in draft. Long term building maintenance plans almost mirrored asset management plans in terms of completeness across the industry with 45% having long term building maintenance plans in place.

Given that the average number of buildings linked to park managers was 85 across 61 returns from members indicates that buildings are a major asset managed by park managers.

Interestingly the median renewal budget for buildings in 2006 was just \$177,450 (average \$271,000) per organi-

Table 1

Organisation	Operation cost per 1000 residents 2002	Operation cost per 1000 residents 2003	Operation cost per 1000 residents 2004	Operation cost per 1000 residents 2005	Operation cost per 1000 residents 2006	Percentage Change from 2004 to 2005
Hastings District	61,014	56,428	55,236	49,504	47,236	(5%)
Canada Bay City(\$A)					63,784	
Canada Bay City(\$NZ)					73,315	
New Plymouth District					162,171	
Rotorua District	90,643	106,975	104,602	106,013	123,993	17%
Maitland City(\$A)					46,487	
Maitland City(\$NZ)					53,434	
Far North District	18,341	25,101	16,143	28,437	25,964	(9%)
Napier City			37,385	38,743	52,273	35%
Franklin District	43,353	22,647	39,095	46,411	57,752	24%
Leichhardt Municipal(\$A)					23,464	
Leichhardt Municipal(\$NZ)					26,970	
Melbourne City(\$A)			389,754	502,805		(100%)
Melbourne City(\$NZ)			419,102	529,268		(100%)
Invercargill City	66,231	70,818	91,692	120,554	165,968	38%

sation which tends to indicate an area of asset management that is probably under funded across the industry.

As a planning tool, Yardstick has been used by organisations trying to establish what an appropriate level of service may be for major assets such as provision of sports fields.

In Wanaka a strategy is currently being prepared by consultants ProphetIAM for Queenstown Lakes District Council to identify how much land and its location should be provided in a community experiencing exceptional growth.

Organisations which contract out grounds maintenance usually have a clear

Table 2

Authority	Buildings covered by an asset management plan	Long term building maintenance plan /programme in place	Completed asset register for buildings	Level of detail used for asset register
Wanganui District	No	Yes	Yes	Component
Kapiti Coast DC	In draft	No	Yes	Component
Timaru District	No	No	No	
Nelson City	In draft	No	Yes	Group
Tasman District	Yes	No	Under development	Component
Papakura District	In draft	Under development	Under development	
Waipa District	Yes	Under development	Yes	Component
Marlborough DC	No	No	Yes	Group
City of South Perth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Group
Western Bay of Plenty District	Yes	Under development	Yes	Component
Orange City Council	No	Under development	Under development	Sub-component
Upper Hutt District	Yes	Yes	Yes	Group
Taupo District	Yes	Yes	Yes	Component

Table 3. Total cost of ALL garden maintenance

Authority	Total cost of garden maintenance for 2005/06	Average cost per square metre per annum	Average cost of gardens per 1000 residents
Richmond Valley Council (\$A)	67,200	23	3,213
Richmond Valley Council (\$NZ)	77,241	26	3,693
Adelaide City (\$A)	2,700,000	9	183,362
Adelaide City (\$NZ)	3,103,448	11	210,760
Gore District	580,027	11	46,555
Victor Harbor City (\$A)	128,000	2	10,360
Victor Harbor City (\$NZ)	147,126	3	11,908
Waimate District	143,000	19	18,333

Table 4. Total cost of ROSE garden maintenance

Authority	Total area of rose gardens maintained m ²	Total number of rose gardens maintained	Total cost of rose gardens maintenance for 2005/06	Average cost per square metre per annum
Queenstown Lakes District	1,940	52		
Adelaide City (\$A)	27,138	1,350	450,000	17
Adelaide City (\$NZ)			517,241	19
Gore District	1,319	43	39,358	30
Victor Harbor City (\$A)	1,581	28	25,000	16
Victor Harbor City (\$NZ)			28,736	18
Waimate District	421	14	10,000	24

Yardstick POOLS

How do you measure your performance in swimming pool operation and management?

The Yardstick Pools benchmarking project is new to Australia in 2007. The following is a sample of information from the NZ Yardstick Pools 2006 report:

- Majority of pools (61%) in NZ were constructed prior to 1975
- 74% of facilities have a customer care programme operable
- Average admittance across facility were 156,056 per facility
- Swim schools on average bring \$164,580 pa to pool facilities (more than half an average pools income)
- Entrance fees per adult swim vary from an adult high of \$8 to a low of \$2.00 with an average of \$3.78. Child, senior swim and concession costs also identified
- Lifeguards hourly pay varied from a low of \$10.55 per hour to \$12.36 per hour; reception costs, swim instructor and team leader costs available
- Total 143 average swims per m³ of water
- Average FTE of 1.4 staff per 10,000 admissions
- Cost per m³ of water across all pool facility types \$258m³
- Managers salary bands indicate that just 26% of managers earn between \$60,000 to \$69,000 per annum
- Total operating cost per admittance \$6; also broken down to different facility types
- Lifeguards average length of employment is just 2 years
- Net operational cost and net cost per swim by pool type
- 67% of members have asset registers, to component level
- Average 55% cost recovery policy (at odds with actual !)
- 59% of facilities have an adopted asset management plan
- Average income from secondary spend \$56,088 pa per facility
- Building maintenance plans are in place for 64% of facilities
- 72% of facilities are currently compliant with NZ Pool Safe
- Just 30% of facilities receive 100% funding for facility renewal plans
- Would you like to join with the 57 NZ swimming pool complexes in 2007? Base cost is A\$2,500, \$500 for additional complexes.

More information: IPWEA web site www.ipwea.org.au/yardstick or from Chris Rutherford chris@prophetiam.com

understanding of what the costs are for various assets maintenance such as garden beds. For others, with in-house operations, it is difficult for managers to identify what the additional resources (both in dollars and staff) are needed each time a new park or street garden is added to the asset list.

Yardstick provides this information at various levels, for example total garden maintenance (Table 3) or at a more detailed level for specific types of garden such as rose gardens (Table 4).

Many organisations joined the project in NZ because they knew that they had poor asset information but had no ability to demonstrate this to senior managers and elected members which is now possible through their participation in the Yardstick program.

ParkCheck

Yardstick has established itself in terms of measuring cost and quantity of provision. Qualitative evaluation has been the more recent addition to the overall equation.

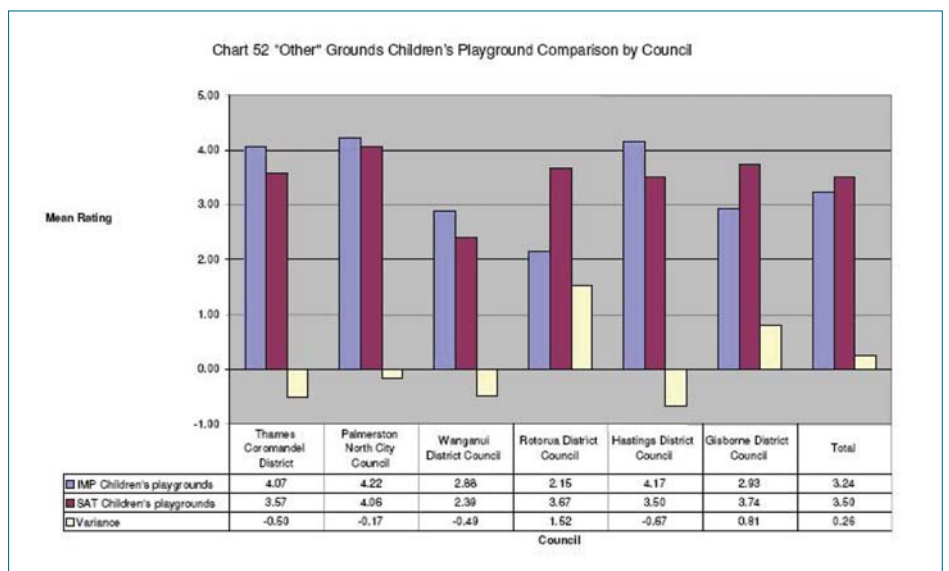
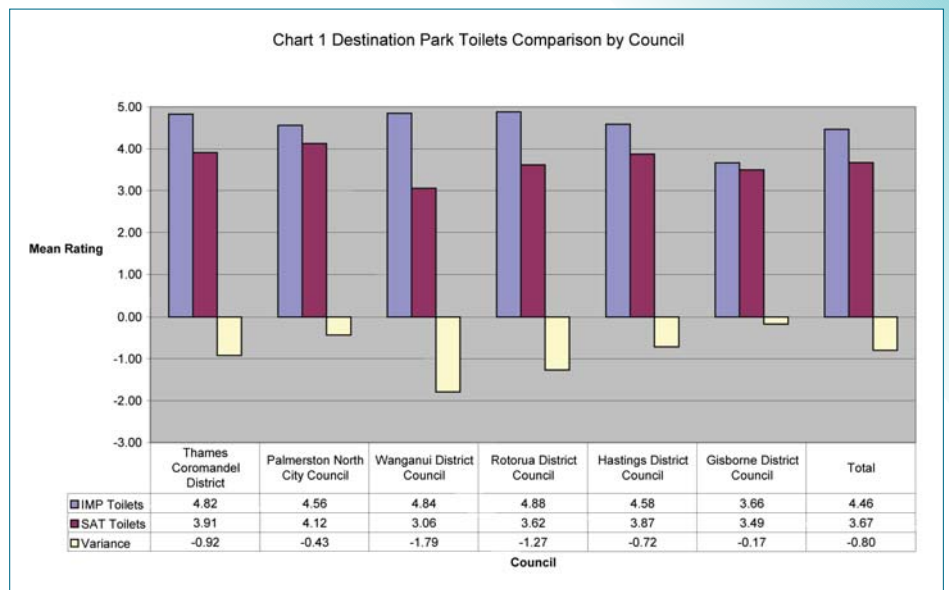
The ParkCheck project owned by NZ Recreation Association and operated in Australia by IPWEA has seen the industry technical group of park managers develop a user intercept survey in collaboration with a respected research company that provides the rigorous research disciplines and provides the analysis of the results.

The surveys completed in early 2006 over four categories of park provide surprising feedback in some areas and expected results in others. The quality of public toilet facilities maintenance is clearly still a challenge in terms of meeting the expectation of communities.

Chart 27 taken from the 2006 report identifies in blue the community expectation in terms of how important toilet facilities are (where 5 is very important) and then how satisfied users were in displayed in purple. Given that this example is for the highest profile parks (Destination Parks) it is clear that the six councils generally still needed to focus energy and resource in this area.

For measuring council performance against established levels of service ParkCheck is providing an independent tool.

ParkCheck may lead to reviewing levels of service where the current level of service appears to exceed that which



the community actually want. More detailed research might be appropriate in these cases. In 2006 'other parks' which include beach reserve, walkways and local reserves (but excludes neighbourhood reserves) showed some variance and over performance in 'importance' (blue column) when measured against 'satisfaction' (purple column) with children's playgrounds.

ParkCheck reports are designed to be easy to read and suitable for senior managers and elected members to review. The openness of the information disclosing organisation names and results make comparisons real and immediate.

The City of Gosnells (WA) is joining the NZ members of the project in 2007 and other Australian members are welcome to join the project.

Measuring customers expectations and levels of satisfaction, balanced against the ratepayers ability and willingness to pay remains a challenge; but a combination of industry wide tools is now providing relevant and useful results.

More information: IPWEA website www.ipwea.org.au/yardstick or from the author Chris Rutherford chris@prophetiam.com.

For information about joining Yardstick Parks or Pools, contact Chris Champion at cchampion@ipwea.org.au