

Summary

Municipalities are keen to know the condition of their sewerage management. Is it as it should be, or can it be changed or improved? If so, in which aspects and how? The answer can be found by looking at other municipalities. How do they operate, but, above all, what can municipalities learn from each other? To find out, the sewerage management in 39 municipalities was compared. This is the first time such a comparison has been made and this is therefore a pilot.

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The 'benchmark' has generated a wealth of data. The most important conclusion is that municipal sewerage can and should develop by taking a look behind the scenes in other municipalities. The knowledge and experience within individual municipalities is there for the taking and can be deployed jointly for the following professionalisation process. This benchmark has shown that the municipal data regarding sewerage management is exchangeable. What is important here is that it should be available and comparable.

One striking conclusion concerns the degree to which the nature and environment of the municipalities influence sewerage management. For instance, municipality size, degree of urbanisation and soil type. The pilot has shown that these environmental characteristics have only a limited influence on the 'sewerage performance'. It is therefore primarily in the way the municipalities work that opportunities for improving the sewerage can be found.

This benchmark is expressly not a 'score list' to find out which municipalities score 'high' and which 'low'. No marks have been issued. Although the size of the sample is large (39 municipalities, with a total of 4.2 million inhabitants), this report does not provide a picture of the general sewerage management in the Netherlands. What the report does do is pinpoint the areas in which municipalities can improve their sewerage management. It also shows how that improvement can be achieved in concrete terms, through cooperation and exchange.

Structure of this report

The benchmark report comprises two parts. Further on in this summary, the two parts are explained contentually. Part A (chapters 1 to 4) describes the methodology in and the process of the benchmark and the 'learning points' from the pilot. Part B (chapters 5 to 11) discusses the actual results of the benchmark in the 39 municipalities. Each participating municipality has also received an individual report concerning their 'own' benchmark results. This includes a 'profile', which shows the municipality those aspects of its sewerage management that can be improved.

Constant widening

In the nineteen eighties, sewerage management attracted political interest. Statutory guidelines were introduced, such as the obligation to formulate a Municipal Sewer Scheme (sewerage plans). Sewerage became a fully-fledged discipline.

In the year 2000, municipalities asked the RIONED foundation to carry out a benchmarking of their sewerage operations to enable them to further improve the quality. This resulted, in 2001, in a feasibility study into benchmarking amongst six municipalities. The findings were so positive that a large pilot was set up. The intention was to limit this pilot to 25 municipalities, but as more municipalities applied to be included, the total number amounted to 39. They have a total of 4.2 million inhabitants, almost 2 million sewage connections and 20,000 kilometres of sewers.

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The participants in the benchmark came together at three meetings. The start-up meeting was held on 13 September 2002. The initial results were discussed in a workshop on 19 February 2003. After a final meeting for the participants, an umbrella report was presented on 25 June 2003. The enthusiasm of the pilot participants grew during the course of the project: a traditionally literally invisible discipline started to become increasingly visible.

After the second meeting, a small number of municipalities formed three learning platforms, to find out where they differed in the aspects of 'dealing with the country side' and 'inspection and cleaning'. A regional group also started working with the pilot results.

The cooperation and exchange intended to improve the sewerage can best be realised in small, regional or thematic groups of municipalities. There is a great need for national standards regarding what 'good' sewerage management entails. Phased improvement using benchmarking seems a sensible way to realise this goal and the sector will therefore be going ahead with such a method.

Methodology and process of the benchmark

The benchmark was set up from both data gathered at each municipality and exchange between the municipalities at the meetings.

After the start-up meeting, the researchers visited all the participating municipalities and gave them a questionnaire. This was completed and then discussed, so any ambiguities could be clarified. The data were analysed and the municipal sewerage compared on five points:

1. *Condition and functioning*: the image the municipality itself has of the quality and functioning of the sewerage.
2. *Environment*: what efforts in its sewerage management does the municipality make for the environment?
3. *Expenditure*: what does the municipality spend on daily sewerage per inhabitant? This is expressly separate from sewerage charges, as these are structured differently in each municipality and therefore difficult to compare.
4. *Organisational capacity*: to what degree can the municipality actually realise what it has in its sewer schemes and how efficiently is that carried out?
5. *Nuisance/complaints*: how many complaints about the sewerage does the municipality receive and how does it handle them?

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To be able to compare the municipalities, each aspect has been given one or more Critical Performance Indicators (CPI). These generate a score, which clearly shows how municipalities 'perform' in the relevant aspect in relation to each other. Based on these differences, it becomes clear where the municipal sewerage management can be improved.

The added value of the exchanges between municipalities became clear at the second meeting in the pilot. The conclusion was that no municipality is the 'best performer'. Neither were the participants presented with clear-cut answers. Instead, they had to interpret the results themselves, searching for the how and why. For example, why does municipality A inspect the sewers in a different way and with a different frequency than municipality B, and what are the results?

Learning points emerging from the methodology

The methodology in the pilot generated the following 'learning points':

1. Benchmarking leads to improvement of the sewerage management and is a logical step towards further professionalisation. The collection of the data and participation in the benchmarking process alone can lead to modifications in methodology. Benchmarking is primarily a learning process.
2. It is essential for data within the sewerage sector to be both available and comparable. The more available they are, the better they can be compared. The same applies to an unambiguous definition of the accepted terms.
3. The comparison must be properly explained to prevent it being interpreted in terms of 'good' and 'bad' performance. Only after such explanation can the actual improvement process begin.

The results of the benchmark

The following results were obtained for each individual aspect:

1. *Condition and functioning*: insight into the functioning and quality of the sewers is important as a foundation for planning. It is striking that some participants base their planning on a relatively limited view of the condition, while others take a broad view. There is no standard within the sector with regard to what the insight into the condition should be. Discussion of this aspect is therefore needed. Many municipalities need to take structural measures over the next few years to improve the functioning.
2. *Expenditure*: the expenditure for daily sewerage management differs greatly. This is probably due to great differences in approach. To enable better comparison of the performances in this area it is important to make agreements as a sector as to what exactly counts as 'sewerage expenditure' and regarding the way of registration. Comparison with others can reveal the degree to which municipalities with higher annual costs score differently in other areas.
3. *Environmental efforts*: municipalities have to limit the pollution emission from the sewers by 2005. They are also no longer permitted to have any non-decontaminated discharge within their borders. The participating municipalities have realised both obligations for an average of 65 percent. The urbanised municipalities achieve 50 percent and the rural municipalities 75 percent. A concerted effort will be needed in the next few years.
4. *Organisational capacity*: to what degree does a municipality realise its sewerage plans within the term and budget it has planned? How do they keep an orderly sewerage? The general conclusion is that the organisational capacity – particularly the planning – is a major point for improvement in the sewerage sector. The municipalities have difficulty keeping their sewerage management 'in order'. This can be due to the fact that the municipalities have a great deal to perform with these days (dealing with the country side, basic emission reduction, replacement of systems). If it remains so in the next few years, then sewerage management will deteriorate. Personnel deployment is expected to play a large part here. It can be deduced from the benchmark, however, that the prompt realisation of plans does not depend solely on personnel deployment. On average, the municipalities realise four of the five projects within the planned term and budget.
5. *Nuisance/complaints*: this is one of the areas in which the standardisation of data is needed. As the differences between the municipalities are great, it is not yet possible to arrive at hard and fast conclusions. We can conclude, however, that the

number of complaints in relation to response time will play an increasingly major role, as the views of the inhabitants constitute an important aspect, certainly for politicians.

The last chapter is entitled, 'The influence of the environment'. A total of six of the environmental characteristics of the participating municipalities were considered:

- Municipality size
- Degree of urbanisation
- Soil type
- Urban growth speed
- Vulnerability of the area
- Type of sewerage system

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The influence of these characteristics was statistically analysed for each aspect. What emerged was that the degree of urbanisation, in particular, plays a role. The other aspects have little influence. The reason for the differences in performance is therefore to be found by municipalities adopting another approach or other methodologies and not directly in the general, local circumstances.