



Resources And Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Report on the Scrutiny of Best Value within the Authority

10th October 2000

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Report on Best Value Scrutiny Review

Introduction

The Panel at its meeting in August 1999, determined to review the Council's progress with its Best Value Programme and examine the methodology being adopted for these Best Value reviews, comparing the situation to advice issued by the Government, the Audit Commission and other external organisations.

Method of Review

In accordance with the above decision, the Democratic Services Officer, in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chair of this Panel subsequently drew up the terms of reference for the review and details were circulated to all Members of the Panel. These are set out below :-

1. To obtain details of the Council's Best Value Programme and to ascertain the methodology used to determine the Programme for Years 1 and 2.
2. To identify the lessons learnt from the pilot studies conducted in the authority and examine whether the series of actions proposed following the studies have been implemented.
3. To examine the methodology being adopted within the authority for the carrying out of individual Best Value reviews, to ascertain the appropriateness of such methods and assess the extent to which individual Service Units are adopting these methods.
4. To seek details of the support being provided by the Council's Best Value Team to service Unit Managers.
5. To identify and review reporting mechanisms for progress/completion of individual Best Value reviews.
6. To obtain an external perspective to Best Value by examining advice issued by the Audit Commission, North Western Local Authorities' Employers Organisation and the Local Government Association.

Evidence

(a) Background Papers

A comprehensive list of relevant background papers relating to the terms of reference of the scrutiny review was provided for Panel Members. These included : -

- (i) A Total Quality Management Information (TQMI) handbook entitled "Achieving Best Value".
- (ii) Details of the Council's Best Value Programme.
- (iii) Details/explanation of how the Programme was determined.
- (iv) A Tameside MBC publication entitled "Learning from the Best Value Pilots".
- (v) Appropriate extracts from the Council's "Best Value Support Pack for Service Managers" which offers practical guidance to managing Best Value.
- (vi) Progress with the Years 1 and 2 Best Value Programmes
- (vii) Details of support provided by the Best Value Team.
- (viii) Reporting mechanisms for progress/completion of Reviews.
- (ix) District Audit reports "Best Value Preparations Audit 1998/1999" and "Draft Report on Best Value Audit 2000/2001".
- (x) Audit Commission publication entitled "Best Value and the Audit Commission in England."

(b) Persons Giving Evidence

Best Value Co-ordinator

The above mentioned background papers enabled the Panel Members gain a more detailed understanding of the subject matter and which covered a significant part of the terms of reference of this scrutiny review.

The Panel learnt that the Council had begun to progress Best Value in advance of the formal introduction of the concept nationally in April 2000. The Panel did, however, question the appropriateness of commencing the Programme in advance of the legislation, given the limited information available at that time on the Government's working arrangements. The Panel raised a series of questions with the Best Value Co-ordinator on the methodology being adopted at that time by the Council and the limited progress being made with the Year 1 and 2 Programmes.

Service Unit Managers

The Panel selected a representative sample of Service Unit Managers from Year 1 of the Programme to be interviewed as part of the Best Value Scrutiny review. The objective being to ascertain the level of progress being made with Best Value within the authority, the level of support being received from the Best Value Team and identify any possible improvements which will assist the Council with delivering Best Value.

It was determined by the Panel that it would be more constructive and less intimidating for the interviews to be conducted by two Members of the Panel, accompanied by a Democratic Services Officer who would facilitate the interviews, take notes and prepare transcripts for the Panel Members.

When notifying the Service Unit Managers that they had been selected to be interviewed as part of the scrutiny review, the Managers were issued with a list of questions to be asked of them at the interview, together with some background notes about the process. Set out below is a summary of the findings from these interviews.

Adult Provision

The Director of Social Services, in consultation with the Chief Executive, had determined that the Best Value reviews in the Social Services Department would be conducted on a Divisional basis. As a consequence Meals Provision was to be the subject of review in Year 1 with all strands of the Adult Provision Unit being the subject of Best Value reviews over a five year period.

It was anticipated that customer surveys would have been conducted in February/March 2000 aimed at identifying customer requirements in respect of meals provided for them.

The opportunity was also being taken to examine private sector provision and the potential for the service to be provided by an external provider. Furthermore, it had been recognised that the service had to be “needs led” and this may include weekend provision of the service and, as referred to above, alternative provider(s).

It was not expected that an Action Plan would be produced until 2001 – particularly in the light of the decision to conduct the Best Value reviews on a Divisional basis.

Ashton Renewal

The Ashton Renewal project has established a small team of officers within the Unit to progress Best Value and a timetable for implementing the review had been prepared. Much of the preparatory work in establishing the Renewal Area had involved extensive customer consultations including a residents’ survey and meetings with key stakeholders/partners – tasks which were an integral part of Best Value.

It was acknowledged by the Unit that there was some difficulty surrounding benchmarking with other regeneration programmes as each had its own emphasis. Advice and support was, however being sought from an academic at Liverpool University who was conducting research in respect of regeneration programmes in the UK.

It was envisaged that an Action Plan based on consultation and feedback would be available by April 2000. However, benchmarking/comparative data was not envisaged to be available until September 2000. For that purpose, a two stage Action Plan was to be produced.

The Panel did, however question the appropriateness of Renewal Programmes (such as Ashton Renewal and Single Regeneration Bid schemes), being subject to Best Value. The Programmes are successful “bids” which have secured external funding and incorporate targets and a mix of objectives against which their “success” is measured against Central Government.

Catering Services

The Head of Recreation explained that due to the following reasons, the Best Value review of the Catering Service had been delayed :-

1. Implications of recent Government Regulations which resulted in responsibility for midday meals transferring from the Local Education Authority to Secondary Schools from 1st April 2000.
2. A Management review of Catering Services in 1999, which at that time included :-

Welfare (Meals on Wheels);
Secondary and Primary Schools Midday Meals;
Child and Family Service; and
Commercial Catering

In terms of progress on Best Value, a survey was to be conducted of all Head Teachers in Primary Schools and steps taken to benchmark with 3-4 comparable local authorities. It was also hoped to include private sector involvement in this process.

Key performance indicators were available for the service – i.e. unit costs and take up of school meals. The government was also to introduce nutritional standards by 2002 with the LEA apparently well within such standards.

Collection and Payments

Much progress had been made with both the Cash Collection and Creditor Payments – which are being conducted as two separate reviews due to them being distinct activities.

There was evidence of much progress with the reviews, which were embracing the whole of the staff. Consultation with customers was at an advanced stage with both the major creditor suppliers and the public.

Furthermore, there was evidence of benchmarking with other Greater Manchester authorities through Benchmarking Groups and CIPFA.

However, it was not anticipated that Action Plans for both activities would be produced before November/December 2000 as the initial timescales of 1st April 2000 appeared to be too ambitious.

Customer Services

In view of the Council's Customer First Project, there was a dilemma with regards scoping the review for Year 1, particularly since there was a number of Best Value projects associated with this initiative. The Customer First Project focused around "life time events" and was supported by a satellite project.

A project specification and objectives had been drawn up and it was intended to complete the project plan – which addressed all aspects of Best Value. The project was at an advanced stage at the time the interview was conducted in mid November 1999. A number of performance indicators exists and these have been reviewed in the light of Customer First Project. A customer satisfaction survey had been conducted of visitors to the Customer Service Centres.

A number of improvements, such as electronic input of forms to the Housing Benefits Section by Customer Service staff, had been implemented which was helping to improve the time taken to process such applications.

The Council was also represented on a National Public Sector Benchmarking Group comprising other local authorities and Government Departments. This Group had produced a Best Standards table, which identified both minimum good practices and best practice.

In summary, the service was at an advanced stage of implementing Best Value with documentary evidence to back up this statement.

Licensing and Enforcement

Extensive work has been carried out to date in respect of the Best Value review of Licensing and Enforcement. A Best Value Team has been established and background papers have been produced on the review, including the scoping of the review. A detailed questionnaire has also been sent to customers in late 1998 and very detailed documentary evidence was collated in Best Value Portfolio files.

In view of Investors in People and ISO 9002 Accreditation, the Service was well placed to implement Best Value. The Best Value reviews were being conducted around the Vision for Tameside and were being carried out in four smaller business units (Weights and Measures, Food Safety, Hackney Carriage Licensing and Health & Safety).

Several continual improvement projects have been completed and others were ongoing.

There was evidence of benchmarking within the Service which was being co-ordinated under the Greater Manchester Environmental Health Officers Group.

A standard format in respect of performance indicators for all Environmental Health services was being developed to enable comparison across Greater Manchester authorities. It was acknowledged, however that standardisation of performance indicators did not necessarily result in comparing “like with like” and it was therefore necessary to identify such differences where they exist.

(c) Evidence Provided by District Audit

The District Audit Report of 1998/1999, which reviewed the preparedness of Tameside for Best Value concluded that the Council had met all the milestones identified by the Audit Commission and had made good progress in :

- Planning for Best Value
- Challenging the way things are done
- Including competition in reviews
- Implementing selection criteria for Best Value service reviews
- Developing the Best Value review methodology
- Providing in house staff training

During the course of the scrutiny review, it came to light that District Audit was to conduct an audit of the Council's Best Value Performance Plan and arrangements for Best Value. It was therefore considered prudent to delay publication of the Panel's findings in advance of the District Audit report being published.

District Audit subsequently published the report “Taking Best Value Forward” in June 2000 and had approved the Council's Best Value Performance Plan as being in accordance with the statutory requirements and guidance. District Audit had, however made two statutory recommendations relating to “Managing Best Value Service Reviews” and “Performance Management System”. The Council has prepared and approved an action plan to address these two issues and had forwarded its response to District Audit.

In addition, there were a number of minor non statutory recommendations highlighted by District Audit which are to be incorporated into a more detailed action plan and subsequent project plan as part of the Council's preparations for providing next year's Best Value Performance Plan.

Summary of Findings

1. The Council's preparations for Best Value were at an advanced stage of readiness prior to its national introduction in April 2000 and many corporate processes are in place to support the Best Value processes.
2. The Council successfully prepared and published its Year 1 Best Value Performance Plan by 31st March 2000 and had in place reasonable management and monitoring systems to deliver its Year 1 objectives.
3. The Panel feels that the Council was over ambitious in expecting Service Units from Year 1 of its Best Value Programme to have completed Action Plans by April 2000 – particularly when the operational details of Best Value were incomplete from Central Government in April 1999.
4. As a consequence of (3) above, it is not surprising that Service Unit Managers were not issued with the very comprehensive “Best Value Support Pack for Service Managers” until summer 1999.
5. Likewise, Best Value training for Service Unit Managers did not commence until summer 1999. The Panel also noted an absence of subsequent training to equip Officers to conduct Best Value Reviews effectively.
6. District Audit further considers the need to identify resources and skills necessary to carry out Best Value Reviews.
7. The Panel is pleased to note that steps as set out in the report to Overview Forum on the District Audit Draft Report – Best Value (Minute 2(c) - 03.07.00) have recently been taken to rectify (5) and (6) above.
8. During the early stages of the scrutiny review the Panel was receiving concerns about the limited support being provided by the Best Value Review Team to individual Best Value reviews.

The Panel welcomes the more pro-active approach now being taken by the Best Value Team to provide direct support to individual reviews.

9. There was also a lack of effective monitoring of progress on Best Value reviews. Furthermore, the Panel is concerned that some Best Value reviews have commenced without an approved project plan.
10. Since May 2000, timely reminders have been sent to Service Unit Managers to submit electronic progress reports to the Best Value Team but indications are that most reviews are making insufficient progress to reach their outturn date.

The Panel further considers the need to clarify the role of the Best Value Review Team in monitoring progress and delivery of Best Value reviews and Best Value Performance Plan.

11. The Panel questioned the reporting arrangements for individual Best Value reviews and recognises that Scrutiny Panels have an important role to play in the Best Value process.

A view also recognised by District Audit.

12. The Scrutiny Panel originally debated the need for a separate Scrutiny Panel devoted entirely to Best Value but acknowledged the recent Council decision in response to the District Audit report by giving Scrutiny Panels a clear role with Best Value Reviews.
13. Whilst there is a culture of performance measurement in the Authority, there is a need to question the appropriateness of current performance indicators, ensure these are quantifiable and measurable and there are supporting records to substantiate the performance measures.
14. There is clear evidence of Service Units benchmarking with the public and private sectors to assist in comparing performance and identifying minimal good practice and best practice.
15. The evidence provided from the interviews with individual Service Units identified that the Council has a good track record in consulting with customers and reporting the results of such consultations.
16. District Audit acknowledges that there is much evidence of Service Units doing effective challenge as a consequence of such matters as Investors in People, IDeA Review and Large Scale Voluntary Transfer.

Furthermore, there is a clear methodology to assist Service Unit Managers in “Best Value Support Pack for Service Managers”.

However, there is a need for checks to be introduced into the review process to ensure these “challenges” are sufficiently robust to satisfy the Best Value Inspectorate.

17. Service Unit Managers need to recognise that cost is not the sole factor when conducting the “Compare” aspect of Best Value – quality is also very important.

18. The term competition has 2 phases :-

- (i) the opportunity for external providers to compete for the service, and
- (ii) the same opportunities are afforded to the In House Service to compete

19. There is a need for the Council to identify and publish the Best Value Programme for Years 3 to 5.
20. The Panel questions the appropriateness of Renewal Programmes (such as Ashton Renewal and Single Regeneration Bid schemes) being subject to Best Value. These programmes have successfully secured external funding and incorporate targets and a mix of objectives against which their "success" is measured by Central Government.
21. There is no evidence as to the quality of the reviews and whether they will meet the Audit Commission Inspectorate standard.
22. There is a weakness in the Best Value Performance Plan showing a lack of co-ordination and cohesion between individual services and as a consequence the document is not "user friendly" enabling the reader to follow through a specific Council policy to identify the effectiveness of the policy across all Council Services.

Furthermore, by presenting the information across service streams not only will it help to break down departmentalism but provide a corporate approach to cross cutting issues.
23. There is a need to address how to link continual improvement with that required by the Best Value review process and the Best Value Performance Plan.

Recommendations

1. That the Council not only begins to review progress with the two statutory recommendations of the District Audit but also actively seeks to comply with the District Auditor's observations.
2. That early consideration be given to how the Council will ensure a balanced and plain english summary of the Best Value Review Plan is distributed to all household by 31st March 2001.
3. That an annual programme be produced to demonstrate how the Best Value Performance Plan will be produced annually.
4. That consideration be given to the structure of the Best Value Performance Plan in subsequent years to demonstrate cohesion between Council services on specific themes and Council policies.
5. That the Council introduces appropriate "checks" to ensure effective challenge of individual services as part of the Best Value process.

6. That the Scrutiny Panel identifies a Best Value Programme for approving individual Best Value Review Plans and considering progress and pre-inspection reports of such reviews.
7. That the full 5 year Best Value review programme be publicised immediately in order that the Scrutiny Panel can determine that all services are included in Best Value.
8. That further consideration is given to the appropriateness of Renewal Programmes (such as Ashton Renewal and Single Regeneration Bid schemes) being subject to Best Value for the reason set out in the report.
9. That the performance of Service Units against statutory and voluntary indicators be reported regularly throughout the year to the Cabinet and variations from the targets either way are recorded, including agreed actions to rectify any shortfalls.