



# PERCEPTIONS OF BEST VALUE:

# APSE SURVEY 2003



GB11132

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## Executive Summary

APSE's third Best Value survey demonstrates that the regime is still evolving and that a variety of methods have sprung up across local authorities in order to deal with an environment of change. What does seem clear from the study is that sharing best practice and networking is invaluable in trying to soften the blow of difficult changes and in preventing feelings of isolation taking hold in service areas and local authorities where progress has been uneven.

Some of the themes brought to the fore by the survey centre around the manner in which local authorities have changed their corporate functions. Local authorities involved in ever increasing levels of consultation both externally and internally. This increase in the availability of information can be seen as a renewal of the contract with local communities. Local authorities are now more focused on service delivery and meeting customer needs – this is the basis upon which authorities and councilors are increasingly judged. Of prime concern to APSE is the role of in-house services which have undergone profound transformation. This has not necessarily led to a weakened role but one that has involved change.

Local authorities are using several methods to develop a competitive edge and to ensure efficiency. Benchmarking and partnerships have been pivotal in adapting to the Best Value regime where cooperation leads to cost-efficiency. In this sense the new system is not solely competitive in that it facilitates the sharing of best practice and information. Strategic issues have come to the fore and coordination has led to greater strategic planning and a more long-term perspective based on the sharing of information. Many services have been amalgamated to this end with the division of tasks being redrawn in order to meet new requirements.

Existing assessment regimes (namely CPA) can help local authorities but respondents identified the need to avoid over-simplifying CPA results and expressed some reservations concerning the "tenuous" basis for comparing some services with others.

# Perceptions and Experiences of Best Value

## Introduction

APSE's very *raison d'être* has changed in direct correlation with the inception and evolution of Best Value. From an organisation which attempted to dismantle, Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) APSE has become an agent for positive change - working with its member local authorities in order to implement CCT's successor regime.

However, there is no room for complacency in an era when rapid technological advance and ever heightening expectations on local authorities give those connected with local government little time to stand still. In the wake of such change there is often a tendency to ignore whether or not people feel Best Value is delivering clear and measurable results. Moreover, without obtaining the views from people on the ground it is all too easy to conflate reality and perception or to advance the rhetorical argument that new is always better. More often, the picture is more complex than that with discrepancies between different locales and in different sectors (APSE, *Inspecting Best Value*, 2002, p.1).

In the spirit of democratic accountability APSE, in consultation with its members, has carried out a piece of empirical research that combines qualitative and quantitative aspects providing an overall picture, however incomplete at this early stage, of Best Value. This report is the third annual survey of its kind carried out by the Association and is based upon a survey questionnaire, which was dispatched to members.

## A Brief History Of Best Value in England and Wales

Best Value was introduced in 1999 by Tony Blair's Labour Administration under the auspices of the Local Government Act 1999. The duty to comply with the Act commenced on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2000. Lets recapitulate on just what Best Value requires of local authorities. The fundamental duty placed upon local authorities is to consult local people, review all functions of local government periodically, secure ways in which to measure performance and produce a performance plan that can be audited by an external auditor. The Act also provided for all local authority services to be inspected and vested powers in the Secretary of State to take action when services were deemed to be failing. Of particular import, of course, is section 3 (1) of the Act, which requires best value authorities to make arrangements that will secure continuous improvement in the way in which they exercise their functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and competitiveness. In Wales there exists the Wales Programme for Improvement. The Programme was first proposed in October 2001 and was introduced in 2002. It is based upon the following principles:

- Cultural change can best be achieved through a combination of self/peer assessment and external regulation; local ownership needs to be taken;
- All services should not be subject to automatic review (dependant on performance);
- All review work, and audit and inspection work, should be proportionate to risk;
- Effective internal and self-imposed scrutiny can be an alternative to some external audit and inspection work.

It is also worth pointing out that Northern Ireland is not represented in this study although Best Value has been voluntarily in place since 1998 and has been legally enforced since April 2002.

### **The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)**

As anyone involved in local government will be well aware the inspection process outlined in the Act manifested itself in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The CPA represents the logical conclusion of the Act itself in its attempt to clarify corporate performance in England by auditing *all* services – a process undertaken by the Audit Commission. Arguments abound over CPA and APSE has taken the view that key variables such as social deprivation should have been factored into the process. Despite this APSE has welcomed the drive towards better performance – a drive that can only benefit the standing of the public sector and in-house services over the long-term.

### **Best Value in Scotland**

The evolution of Best Value in Scotland followed a different course to England and Wales. Firstly, between 1997-2002 Scottish Councils benefited from a regime that could be described as *de facto* Best Value. In short, a moratorium on CCT existed with Best Value being applied on a voluntary basis by Scottish Councils. Best Value was only made statutory following the passing of the Local Government Bill of 2003. This officially abolished CCT while making provision for best value, the Power of Well-Being and Community Planning. Moreover, while the fundamentals of best value legislation in Scotland mirrored those in England there were important differences pertaining to the administration of the regime. The Scottish version is less rigid and interventionist when dealing with councils perceived to be under performing. Importantly, they are not subject to the CPA or to outside intervention imposed by central government if deemed to be performing badly. It is worth noting that the Scottish Executive is committed to legislating further so as to extend best value to all public bodies – including QUANGOS, Executive Agencies and the Executive.

## The APSE Study 2003

This survey builds upon some of the findings of the APSE study, *Inspecting Best Value* (see APSE Briefing 18/02), which emerged in 2002. It is the third Best Value Perceptions survey produced by APSE since the inception of the new regime. It establishes general trends pertaining to persisting and emerging perceptions of Best Value. The survey contained a total of 12 questions which, in a nutshell, sought to elucidate the impact Best Value is having on front-line services. The questions ranged from measuring the extent to which Best Value is achieving its own goals (namely the 5 Es of effectiveness, efficiency, economy, environmental improvement, and equity) to questions surrounding consultation, long term planning service integration, procurement, competitiveness and the degree to which Best Value has/has not politicised or depoliticised decision making. The survey was targeted to certain selected members so that the sample could reflect those with knowledge of decision making.

### Job Specifications of Those Involved in the Study

It seems prudent to make clear at this early juncture that responses to the survey came from a wide array of service areas and though it is the purpose of this study to provide a holistic picture it is wise to bear in mind the complexity of local government and the vast array of competing priorities that comprise the delivery of public services in general. The responses to this particular survey came from a number of job areas which varied in terms of both seniority and subject matter. Examples of some of the job areas are given below.

*Client Services Manager; Branch Publicity Officer; Head of Corporate Policy; Environmental Services Quality Manager; Landscape Principal Officer; Road Services Network Manager; Building Maintenance Group Property manager; Best Value Manager; Business Services Manager; Head of Service for School Scene; Assistant Director of Environmental Services; Repairs maintenance Business Improvement manager; Best Value Corporate Policy Officer; Business Development Manager; Meals on Wheels (Meals Service Manager); Building Services Commercial Support Manager; Community Services Project Co-ordinator; Continuous Improvement Manager; Public Sector Enterprise Service manger; Best Value Audit and Process Review Manager; Environmental Services Strategy Development Officer; Assistant street cleaning Manager; Parks and Open Spaces Manager; Principal Parks and open Spaces Officer; Housing technical Services Manager; Deputy Director of Direct Care services; Purchasing Manager; Environmental Protection Strategy policy Development Officer; Managing Director of Commercial Services; Head of Service for catering and Cleaning; Team Leader for Strategy and Performance in Technical Services; Strategic management Officer in the Chief Executive's Department; Staffing Officer; Head Of Best Quality.*

## Service Areas Involved in the Survey

Even though job titles often indicate the department of the respondents the names of departments as well as their corporate remit often differ greatly. Examples of some of the department's involved in responding are as follows:

*Environmental Services; Landscape Group; Road Services; Building Maintenance; Personnel; Business Services; Catering/Cleaning and Schools; Repairs Maintenance; Best Value Performance Management; Meals on Wheels; Buildings DLO; Community Services; Street Cleansing; Parks and Open Spaces; Education and Leisure; Joint Authorities Support; Supplies; Commercial Services; Technical Services; Chief Executives; Facilities Management; Corporate.*

At this stage it is our intention to go through each question posed by the study and to try and evaluate the responses both in the quantitative and qualitative areas. Analysis of the qualitative data is of necessity generalised due to the fact that, quite often, no two answers are the same. What we're extrapolating here is the emphasis of the answer and the ways in which they reflect similar or differing priorities/views.

# Chapter 1

## 1.Has Best Value Produced Greater Focus in Local Authorities?

The first section of the study was sub-divided into three sections within the overall context of the question outlined above. This question was particularly aimed at gauging the impact of the 5Es (effectiveness, efficiency, economy, environmental improvement and equity) on local authorities.

The results were as follows:

### On Service Delivery Aspects:

#### 1.1 Yes (90%) No (10%)

The 90% who believe that the focus on service delivery under best value represents an 8% rise on last year's survey when 82% of respondents answered in this way.

### On Quality Outcomes Rather than Cost

#### 1.2 Yes (80%) No (20%)

The 80% who believe that the focus on quality outcomes rather than cost has risen from 62% last year representing an 18% increase.

### On Tangible Benefits to the Community

#### 1.3 Yes (80%) No (20%)

Those who believe there has been a greater focus on tangible benefits to the community has risen by 13% since 2002 – from 67% in 2002 to 80% in 2003.

1.4 Those who answered yes to any of the above questions were invited to give their comments and we received a range of answers but broad convergence around three central themes as follows:

- Greater Customer Focus
- Greater Consultation
- Greater Emphasis on Service Delivery

### Customer Focus

A high number of respondents drew attention to the fact that Best Value has reoriented their services towards customer focus – indeed this was the most frequent comment of

all. One fairly typical response claimed that Best Value had “allowed services to adapt to a customer based approach and to measure what’s important” for the community. This apparent re-ordering of priorities around customers, the community, and the public is welcomed in nearly all of the responses with one respondent saying, “although Best Value is a larger challenge, we now, at least, have to give evidence for what we do.” Several respondents saw Best Value as congruent with “meeting community needs” in a bottom-up fashion. One respondent claimed that being “community responsive” helped avoid duplication and unnecessary costs” while another made the insightful observation that there is now “more focus on why and who and less on how much.” This was echoed by a respondent working in street cleansing who said there was “more of a focus on standards in street cleansing rather than input frequencies.”

Another theme within the customer focus that arose time and again was reference to a nascent quality agenda. One respondent simply stated that Best Value entailed a “change towards the delivery of high quality services.” Several respondents claimed that Best Value had proven instrumental in guaranteeing their award of Chartermark Status. One authority has set up Service Improvement Teams (SITs) to allow services to be reviewed and compared.

The above point also dovetails with the stress placed by survey responses on Best Value acting as “a spur towards service coordination” and integration along with, in the words of one respondent, “more focus by managers on front line services” (a large number of responses made reference to “greater awareness shown by managers”).

## **Consultation**

A large proportion of responses made reference to consultation. Consultation is clearly interrelated with the other categories but appeared on a high number of responses. One fairly typical response was that “more consideration is now given to the consultation of service users” while another response stated “my local authority now gives more access to information than ever before.”

## **Service Delivery**

The emphasis made above to a new focus on front line services is also represented in the number of times respondents made the point that Best Value has placed the emphasis on service delivery. A typical reply was “there is now more concentration on delivery of services.” Some felt this focus leads to more time being apportioned to outcomes and impact on the community while the end of CCT was, according to one respondent, indicative of a “shift away form an adversarial approach to a new focus on partnership.” Several of the respondents mentioned partnership in relation to service delivery and the benefit of this approach as opposed to CCT.

## Other Responses

There were other responses worthy of note that fell outside the three themes identified above. While most of the responses in this section were supportive of Best Value a few of them said things like "implementation is difficult" while one respondent viewed Best Value as a cost-cutting exercise pointing to the 2% annual cost savings required by the regime. Another typical complaint was that Best Value involved "too many reviews" that were "time consuming."

## Chapter 2

### 2. Has Best Value led to a Greater or Lesser Role for In-House Providers.

#### 2.1 Greater (35%) Lesser (25%) No Change/Other (40%)

Those who believe Best Value has led to a Greater Role for In-House Services has fallen to **35%** in 2003 from **39%** in 2002. Those who believe that there is a lesser role has fallen from **49%** in 2002 to **25%** in 2003. The trend here (given the **40%** or so which indicated no change – a rise of **28%** from 2002 when **12%** indicated no change) would suggest that the 'jury is out' on this particular question. This would suggest that respondents are perhaps more settled with the process at present or at least reconciling themselves with the possibility that it is likely to be in place over the long-term.

#### 2.2 Respondents were asked to comment upon their answers:

It is worth pointing out at the outset that many of the answers simply said no change as recorded above. Besides the no change category were answers in four broad thematic areas as follows.

- Partnerships
- Greater emphasis on Partnerships
- Budget Issues
- Shift in Role of in-House Services

#### Partnerships

A large number of responses discussed the move to partnership and their was a roughly even split between positive and negative appraisals. A typical comment was "there are now more partnership arrangements within the district which allows long-term commitment, expansion, investment and growth." There was some emphasis on the positive aspects such as a willingness to "involve others where possible" in service delivery. A large number of replies, however, saw partnership as a euphemism for outsourcing. One fairly blunt response summarises this element succinctly:

*"There is lesser in-house involvement due to partnership working." One respondent said, "all services were in-house under CCT but this has declined under Best Value."*

The qualitative evidence like the quantitative results suggest a mixed picture and a marked uncertainty over the role of partnership working. Clearly partnerships were often viewed as genuine and community focused but they were also measured against the perceived decline in in-house services articulated by many respondents.

## Budget Issues

The budgetary constraints Best Value can place upon in-house services flowed through a significant proportion of responses. Several responses mentioned the need for “strong political commitment to in-house services” given the financial constraints facing local authorities. A not untypical reply from grounds maintenance professional said, “all grounds maintenance work is contracted out and there is limited scope for in-house services as things stand.” Another response equated Best Value with “downsizing” while another stressed “additional pressure on all services.” He/she also stressed the fact that the drive to “focus on key services (such as Education and Health) was to the detriment of others such as Culture and Leisure.” Several responses talked of “rationalisation of the workforce due to efficiency saving under Best Value.” We are, of course, referring here to some of the concerns about in-house services playing a lesser role and this is not the whole story but it is, however, a significantly frequent perception of Best Value among APSE members to warrant consideration here.

## Shift In Role of In-House Services

The most common response talked about the change in the role of in-house services with varying shades of emphasis as to whether this shift is a good thing. A typical response was to say that in-house service has no greater or lesser role, simply a **different** one.

This was summed up by one respondent who said, “in-house services are now seen as providers not contractors.” Another said “the role is different not greater or lesser. There are more partnerships with agencies and neighbouring authorities. The authority is now more of an **enabler**.” The word enable cropped up in many responses – “we’re now an enabling body.” This respondent went on to describe the “enabling role” as a “Thatcherite concept” but gave no indication as to whether he/she approved of this. Many responses cited the rise of “market testing.”

An equally large number of respondents, though, stressed the **opportunity** for in-house services to “widen service delivery scope.” According to one such appraisal “more choice is good for in-house services” while another again emphasised the opportunity idea saying, “the opportunity is now there for in-house services to show they can deliver.” Others cited the opportunity for “earlier involvement in process and funding decisions coupled with greater client contact.” One respondent in housing said, “tenants are now given more say which is good for in-house services.” One respondent said, “in-house services have the advantage because they are consulted on how the service area will compete and they know what Best Value is about.” Another insightful response said, “the council is now allowed to explore current service delivery options and to prioritise where possible.”

Again the picture here is mixed at best. Three words encapsulate the findings and the way in which the in-house role has shifted under Best Value:

- *Different:* The role for in-house services has not increased or decreased but has been reoriented.
- *Enabler:* The local authority is now more concerned with delivery of services rather than determining their function. This is driven by a host of partners and, by implication, consumers within the community. This was seen as sometimes detrimental to in-house services.
- *Opportunity:* A large number of responses viewed current developments as an opportunity to develop in-house services and to demonstrate their viability

## Chapter 3

### 3. Has Your Service been Involved in a Best Value Review?

#### 3.1 Yes (83%) No (17%)

3.2 Those who answered yes to the above question were asked to volunteer comments as to whether the Best Value review had led to better service provision and to specify which actions had been taken following any review.

As the data demonstrates, the vast majority of respondents said that their service or their authority had taken part in a Best Value review. The survey originally asked who carried out the review but such was the variety of responses that no meaningful trend can really be fleshed out here rather than to say that the majority were carried out by internal and external managers or Heads of Service with a few being carried out by the Audit Commission.

The review has led to a number of often disparate developments but has broadly involved three themes which can be parceled out as follows:

- The Implementation of Improvement Plans
- The Review led to Various Forms of Reorganisation
- The Review Resulted in Tangible Improvements with Qualifications.

#### The Implementation of Improvement Plans

A very large number of affirmative responses pointed to the development of Improvement Action Plans during the post Best Value Review period. A number linked the plan to "service delivery" and most specified its generic nature. A typical response linked the plan to "targeting resources better" while a high number said the plan was linked to "high quality and efficiency." There was some deviation from this standard improvement plan with some respondents highlighting other avenues to improvement such as "including the reviews recommendations within a business plan."

#### Forms of Reorganisation

The qualitative information in this area included many references to reorganisation or things being done differently in the aftermath of the review. This part of the survey elicited an eclectic array of responses. At the one end were those respondents who drew attention to significant strategic or corporate changes being wrought in the wake of the review. An example of such a response was "the review led to comprehensive structure and service delivery changes, the introduction of a training programme and an amalgamation of the client/contractor function." Other respondents echoed two of the

themes in this response. Firstly, the comment that the review leads to a “reorganisation of the service structure” was not untypical. Nor untypical were responses outlining “the abolition of the client-contractor split.” Many responses situated these changes and others within the context of greater “partnership”, more “customer focus” and “improvements in service delivery.”

While these responses capture the perceived outcomes of the reviews others delved deeper into some of the structural issues that flow from them – i.e. on what basis were the reviews to be implemented and were they reliant on budgetary constraints. One respondent claimed that his/her authority was accused of a “protectionist attitude to in-house provision” and was “uncertain of improvement.” Another response talked of a “lack of consultation” during the review and the use of “out of date information.” This respondent goes on to say that “APSE did an independent review” as the authority had been unimpressed with the Audit Commission approach “failed to identify innovation and improvement” and had decided *a priori* to “recommend outsourcing.” One response said the review was “led by the client side” and “wasn’t thorough.”

Several responses talked about a “better scrutiny process” while other responses in this area included the opinion that the review had produced “greater investment in services” and “better provision which, in turn, actually helps to minimise budget cuts.”

Thus while the reality of reorganisation and the obvious juggling of finite resources is not in doubt there remains a distinct lack of clarity over whether in-house services are losing out or gaining ground under best value. What is clear is that the process is both uneven and dependent upon the position on the in-house service prior to the review. Some responses view Best Value as something resembling a threat while others clearly see the process as an opportunity to do things differently.

### **Tangible Improvements?**

A large number of responses thought the review was producing improvement in services. A typical response was “the review helped improve service delivery at operational level.” The vast majority of respondents, however, simply stated that improvement plans were being implemented and that the “jury was out” (as one respondent put it) on whether they were working. The idea of improvement was welcomed in most responses however – a typical answer being that “the best value review should help with the continuous improvement agenda.”

A significant proportion of the responses qualified the above with one referring to “obstacles to improvement.” Another cited the role of “redistributing funds between services” - a process that another respondent claimed was “artificially improving services as a whole by pumping funds into those with a high profile while degrading others.”

**3.3** Those who answered negatively were asked when their review was due and whether Best Value had changed their operations in any case.

The paucity of answers here make it clear that Best Value is proceeding apace and local authorities are adapting to it - willingly or not. However, several of the negative responses (almost half) said they had no intention of going ahead with Best Value Reviews. One respondent stated, "other mechanisms were being considered" while another said, "there are no plans for a corporate review as the unit is subject to continuous review and scrutiny." Another response said, "all options would be considered." Just over half within this category said they had Best Value reviews planned while eliciting some of the changes wrought by Best Value. These included "issuing service standards and widening consultation through surveys as well as benchmarking." Another respondent talked of "greater communication at all levels of activity." One respondent said his/her authority was currently "reviewing the review" and wanted "thematic reviews not ones that are service specific."

One respondent gave an anomalous answer that is nevertheless worthy of note. It was stated in this particular case that no best value review had taken place. Rather, a "Chartermark Process" had been completed and "Chartermark Status" had been successfully attained by the Council in question. The process had looked at "every aspect of the service and had led to improvement action plans." This is evidence that alternative mechanisms are available in carrying out an assessment of services.

## Chapter 4

**4. The Review Process is Built Around the 4Cs. Looking at each “C” from your own experience:**

**4.1 Do you think the review process sufficiently challenged how services are provided? Yes (63%) No (35%) Other/No Change (2%)**

**4.1a Respondents were encouraged to comment on their answers.**

A large number of responses were left blank here perhaps reflecting that there was a degree of overlap in relation to question 3 on the Best Value Review process. However, a significant proportion of respondents did record comments. As the data shows the majority of respondents believed that the process had sufficiently challenged how services were run.

Several of the negative responses questioned whether the review had gone far enough or whether it had any real teeth in terms of effecting meaningful change. Some of the responses in the negative are worthy of quoting at length:

*The Review did not cover why we do what we do. The challenge was too tepid and really looked at what people would like in addition to current services rather than taking a fundamental look at existing practices.*

Another response, in a similar vein, stated:

*The reviews did not consider reorganisational changes that were/or have taken place during the period. The appropriateness of some of these changes and their relation to service provision was not addressed*

Many more responses, as the data demonstrates, approved of the process believing it to have provided a “sufficient challenge.” A concise response but indicative of many responses simply stated that the review process allowed these particular respondents authority to “challenge, compare, consult and compete.” Another respondent said he/she “would recommend 4Cs as a good systematic review but which depended on the culture and politics of the council.” Another said that the review “opened up the challenge from defending existing practices to being totally open and honest.”

One respondent vividly described the way in which his/her local authority has met the challenge faced by services subject to the review. Again, this response is worth quoting at length:

*Every review starts with the initial challenge. Following this our authority holds a ‘challenge day’ involving stakeholders and other 3C’s. This has been successfully*

*applied. Every service has been required to develop service-specific hypotheses in order to challenge assumptions behind the service.*

#### **4.2 Has the amount of consultation allowed people to exert more influence on service delivery?**

**Yes (93%) No (7%)**

##### **4.2a Those who answered in the affirmative were asked to comment upon their answers.**

As the data makes clear an overwhelming majority of the responses believed that their had been an increase in consultation and, in turn, an extension of those involved in influencing service deliver. Very few responses perceived this negatively and the main concern seemed to centre around offering constructive criticism of how consultation could either be augmented or made better. Some notable responses in this area included:

*Consultation has increased a great deal although there is concern over the form in use. Focus groups are predominant rather than representatives of stakeholders and there is a lack of community involvement.*

Another notable comment comment followed a similar theme:

*Consultation does not always have a wide enough target audience. There is too much concentration on captive audiences and interest groups at the expense of the wider public.*

This theme was elaborated on in one more response that merit lengthy quotation:

*Large disparate organisations like local councils do not know how to consult effectively. There is a profound need for a cohesive approach that takes in the views of under-represented groups like schoolchildren and families who are too often left out. Some officers seem to think consultation means approaching user groups already represented. This often means that "retired men" are over-represented at the expense of the wider public.*

Some respondents believed that the increase in consultation is not necessarily filtering through to the "wider public" cited above. As one respondent succinctly puts it, "more consultation, yes, but not necessarily more public involvement." A very typical response acknowledged greater consultation but said his/her authority/service was "looking at ways to raise public input."

The majority of responses were broadly supportive of the consultation implications with quite a few referring to it as "the best feature of best value" or "the most positive aspect of best value." Several mentioned the methods being used such as "panels, focus

groups, and exit surveys.” One response alluded to the fact that “at the scrutiny stage services have to show how public feedback was used to improve services.” A fairly representative comment on the consultation aspect of Best Value was “consultation is a big growth area: we are now a far more outward looking council as a result of Best Value.”

Several respondents from the housing sector not only noted improvements in services wrought by consultation but made some highly informative comments that are noted below:

*Our tenants are involved in budget setting for HRA works programmes and capital investment strategy. There are also tenants representatives on the scrutiny committee.*

This apparent trend was reflected in another response:

*Consultations have involved tenants deciding on priorities for repairs.*

Finally;

*The tenants are involved with project times, the choice of materials and the nature of repairs.*

Thus it seems clear that consultation is increasing with a variety of methods being deployed and with a variety of outcomes. No respondents argued against consultation *per se* although several drew attention to the difference between consulting established groups and consulting the wider public.

#### **4.3 Do you compare your service with others?**

***Yes (90%) No (10%)***

##### **4.3a Those answering the above question in the affirmative were asked to elaborate on their answers.**

The vast majority of answers gave the following replies within their response although this was not an exhaustive list of those agencies/bodies/groups/facilities that were utilised to compare information and data. The four broad categories of reply were as follows:

- APSE/Performance Networks
- The Audit Commission
- Other Local Authorities
- The Private Sector

Most of the responses in this section of the survey tended to elicit who and what they use for the purpose of comparison. As stressed the above list was not exhaustive and other sources of comparison mentioned included the following:

*Published Data; Housing Associations; Contractors; the Internet; Benchmarking Partnerships; internal sub-contractors; Unitary family groups; CIPFA; Beacon Councils; Core Cities (for core city authorities); CIH; Housemark; MGV; and AGMA.*

#### **4.4 Although under Best Value there is no requirement to go out to competition, has its introduction led to more or less?**

***More (50%) Less (28%) No change/other (22%)***

#### **4.5 If you answered more to the previous question, how has the notion of competitiveness been handled?**

It is worthy of note here that relatively few respondents gave comments – less than half although a number of clear trends did emerge in the comments given as to which methods have been deployed in the face of the competitiveness issue. Many of those who responded did, however, use the tick box categories below to inform their comments. It is worth citing the tick box categories here as they undoubtedly had a major suggestive impact upon the answers given. The categories were as follows:

- Formal Tendering Process
- VCT
- Market Analysis
- Benchmarking
- Partnership
- Other

The majority of answers used categories from the list given. They cited one or more of the categories while others elaborated on these or gave responses about the competitiveness issue in general. Around three quarters of the answers given said that their authority/department used a combination partnership and benchmarking with benchmarking proving the most common response. These responses were often mixed with others such as market analysis which appeared in around half of the responses given. Around half of those answers given also said they were using a Formal Tendering Process. One respondent said that his/her authority was using all of the above categories but failed to elaborate on how this was achieved.

A respondent from Highways Maintenance said, “services were contracted out to the private sector for long-term comparison.” Other responses worthy of note here did not fit in to any of the established categories but articulated how they were dealing with competitiveness. They are worth citing here:

*Our performance is weighted against cost and the supply chain procurement value.*

*There is more general awareness of competitive factors in our authority than in the days before Best Value.*

*Competition has had a neutral effect.*

*It is difficult to get information from the private sector unless there is something in it for them. This is one of the main problems with Best Value.*

Only two respondents cited VCT as a method used to handle the competitive challenge.

## Chapter 5

### 5. What Issues Drive the Procurement Decisions?

Financial Issues  
(73%)

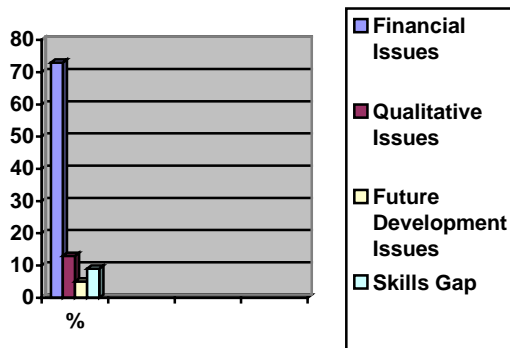
Qualitative Issues  
(13%)

Future Development Issues  
5 (%)

Skills Gap  
(9%)

Question five clearly demonstrates that financial issues is the key variable in determining what drives procurement decisions. It is important to note that the research has been refined due to the fact that the respondents tended not to list their priorities in numerical order. Rather they noted their top priority in making procurement decisions. The data was tallied on this basis.

The results are further demonstrated in the graph below:



## Chapter 6

### 6. How are the Procurement Decisions Taken?

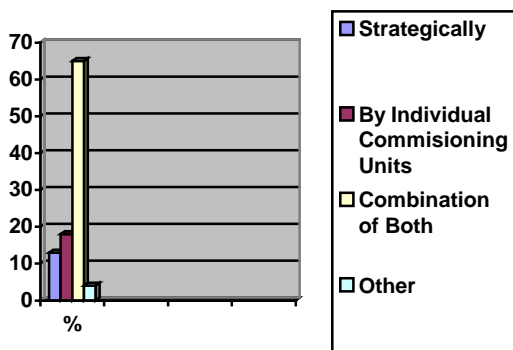
Strategically  
(13%)

By Individual Commissioning Units  
(18%)

Combination of Both  
(65%)

Other  
(4%)

The data clearly demonstrated that most local authorities use a combination of strategic procurement and individual commissioning units. The results are further exemplified in the chart below.



## Chapter 7

### 7. Has the Introduction of Best Value led to Greater Long Term Planning?

*Greater (73%) Lesser (10%) Other/No Change (13%) No Answer (4%)*

#### 7.1 Respondents were invited to comment upon their answers.

The data clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of respondents felt that there is now more of an emphasis on longer term planning. A little less than half offered no comments on this issue beyond their yes/no answers. Those answering tended to have answered in the affirmative. This question can be sub-divided into three sub-categories as follows:

- Strategic Issues
- Improvement Plans over a set timescale
- Other responses

#### Strategic Issues

A substantive number of respondents commenting here stressed the growth in strategic planning following Best Value reviews. A typical response in this category stressed “we have progressed along strategic lines since Best Value came in.” Another comment worthy of quotation said, “Best Value has led to long-term strategic planning and the gradual elimination of the “annually” mentality. Another respondent said “inevitably we have moved to link services with the big strategic picture following Best Value.”

#### Improvement Plans Over a Set Timescale

Around three-quarters of those commenting here described various forms of improvement plan traversing several services that conformed to some kind of set timescale. This obviously intersects with the strategic issues highlighted above. Some typical comments in this category are quoted at length below:

*We now have three-year service plans drawing on the service improvements targeted in Best Value Reviews. Mangers have to adapt timescales to monitor long-term impact.*

*We now have a three-year SLA and three-year capital budgeting that allows for better long-term planning.*

#### *Other responses*

The other responses category included a variety of responses from:

- (i) those dissatisfied with the current arrangement to those qualifying their answer with certain caveats about the complexity of devising long-term plans.
- (ii) Those expressing different forms of long-term planning deviating from the more standard responses.

In the first category those with reservations about the nature of long-term planning following their Best Value reviews some of the following quotes are indicative.

*Long –term planning has increased due to outsourcing – we had to produce a Business Base Infrastructure.*

*The move to long-term planning was not just down to Best Value. It began prior to it with the introduction of a performance management system, a community strategy, aims and targets as well as a five-year improvement plan.*

*There is a temptation to produce “quick fix” decisions to keep inspectors happy.*

*Short-term budget problems cloud all else. Planning is not ongoing – it only happens when there is a Best Value review.*

*There are too many local issue Action Plans*

In the second category a range of different approaches to long-term planning were expounded upon:

*In Housing services we have ten year ALMO bids*

*Now we have a more formal long-term approach. We share information with a wider audience in order to establish strategic vision and to widen our goals.*

*Although the council had a long-term 30 year vision and short term annual/business plans there was no medium term planning (5 years). This has now been addressed.*

*There is now a desire to invest in long-term partnerships that deliver continuous improvement.*

## Chapter 8

### 8. How has the Introduction of Best Value affected political involvement? Has it led to Greater Involvement?

#### 8.1 Respondents were encouraged to elaborate upon their answers.

There were a variety of responses in this section and they fall into three main categories.

- Those who believe that Best Value has led to Greater Political Involvement.
- Those who believe there has been a Less Political Involvement.
- Those who believe that the political role has changed but is not necessarily more or less.

#### Greater Political Involvement

The data clearly show that the majority of respondents felt that there has been a marked increase in political involvement under best value. The comments of the respondents in this category help us make greater sense of these replies. Some of the responses are highlighted below.

*Political Involvement has increased through tighter reporting of Best value Performance Indicators. Around 50 a run across the cabinet on a monthly basis but they are not always put to a purposeful end.*

*The members are heavily involved with Best Value Reviews.*

*Best Value has led to a greater requirement to report outcomes and on-going progress to committee.*

*Due to heightened communication under Best Value there is more political access for all.*

*There is a greater willingness to challenge the status quo and more debate with members before proposed changes.*

*There is direct involvement of portfolio holder, chairs and vice chairs of Scrutiny on reviews teams. Every review has a member consultation event to which all members are invited.*

*Improved delivery has resulted in greater encouragement from councilors.*

## Less Political Involvement

Those stressing less political involvement also provided a variety of answers.

*Few members have any interest in Best Value*

*There is no 'steering' from members other than requests for savings.*

*Best value is mainly driven by officers except at committee stages.*

*Politicians take one step back as they feel it is a cost cutting exercise.*

*The politicians are reluctant to get involved because they see Best value as a 'managerial agenda.'*

## Those who Believe the Political Role Has Changed

*As with all surveys there are pieces of information which do not fit neatly into the dominant categories. As the data shows, a significant number said there had been no change in the level of political involvement under Best Value while even those who gave comments in the affirmative and the negative were keen to stress the change of roles.*

*Involvement is a little greater except for the formation of ALMOs.*

*Members are no longer interested in the mechanics of Best Value reviews – they're more interested in pushing through the things they want from a service.*

*Due to the CPA councilors now need to take a lead.*

*It hasn't brought a lot of change although we now have a Head of Procurement.*

The statistical data and the qualitative data, as stressed, demonstrate a clear perception that political involvement has increased. What is less clear and evident from the comments made is the nature of that political involvement. Some members are directly involved with Best Value while others feel it to be a technocratic issue which is the preserve of officers.

## Chapter 9

### 9. Has Best Value Led to Greater Service Integration?

*Yes (73%) No (27%)*

**9.1 Those answering in the affirmative were invited to comment upon their answers. The comments given can be put into two sub-categories:**

- Removal of the Client/Contractor Split
- The Restructuring of Services and the Amalgamation of Services

#### **Removal of the Client/Contractor Split**

Over half of the responses given made some reference to that fact that the review process has resulted in moves to remove the client/contractor split. Some fairly typical responses are cited below:

*There has been a total absorption of the client side into our Department which has been made easier by political decentralisation.*

*We are currently removing the client/contractor split and moving back to the idea of a service provider with a budget.*

*A Client/Contractor merger is imminent in our authority.*

#### **The Restructuring of Services and Amalgamation**

Around three-quarters of those answering in the affirmative talked about the reorganisation or restructuring of services that is occurring within their local authorities and/or service areas as a result of best value reviews. The themes of amalgamation can also be subsumed within this category because a large number of respondents explained their restructuring in terms of combining service areas to deliver greater cohesiveness. Some indicative answers are given below:

*We are currently going through a restructure that combines catering, cleaning, and grounds maintenance.*

*We have restructured departments into one strategic section comprising six amalgamated departments.*

*There has been an amalgamation of services: council tax and benefits - public libraries and schools. This process has been managed through a Best Value Scrutiny Panel.*

*We now face a greater challenge on service delivery. This has involved a reconfiguration of housing benefits, council tax and school libraries.*

*Because all services have been involved in the restructure and drawing up the improvement plans they have ownership and commitment to deliver.*

As the data shows almost three-quarters of those taking part responded in the affirmative to the question posed by the survey. The comments volunteered by the respondents went further than this by talking of corporate restructuring and the amalgamation of services.

## Chapter 10

### 10. Under Best Value has the Pressure to Compete and Achieve efficiency Savings Affected the Pay and Conditions of Directly Employed Staff?

*Yes (25%) No (65%) Don't Know/Other (8%) No Answer (1%)*

10.1 The respondents answering in the affirmative were invited to comment upon their answers. The answers fell into three broad themes as follows:

- The Impact of Single Status
- Other Areas of Impact

#### The Impact of Single Status

*A significant number of replies were pointed out the relationship between single status and Directly Employed Staff. Some typical answers are cited below:*

*The main issue for manual workers has been single status*

*Basic Funding Structures and single status have had a much greater impact than Best Value.*

*Single Status has meant that available core hours have been reduced by 2 hours per employee over the last two years in order to maintain the same overall wage bill.*

#### Other Areas of Impact

It was impossible justify another separate category given the diversity of answers relating to Best Value's impact on pay and conditions suffice to say that many expressed concerns about the present while a few answers provided ways of meeting the Best value challenge. A selection of responses is given below and these broadly reflect the type of issues arising:

*We have less overtime and only get essential car mileage. The craft and manual services have had their bonuses capped.*

*We had a two-tier workforce but that is about to be addressed and harmonization is planned for 2003/04.*

*The pressure to compete has accelerated and this has resulted in some job losses, lower annual 'cost of living' rises. There are greater flexibility requirements and unpaid overtime has become more prevalent."*

*Staff leased car contributions are being reduced and there are more responsibilities being generated without reciprocal salary rises.*

*As stressed some gave more equivocal responses as to the benefits of the present arrangement:*

*Because of the impact of CCT we have attempted to address issues arising in Best Value through improving quality with existing resources being realigned rather than cutting terms and conditions.*

*Best Value allowed for the reintroduction of working conditions in liner with national terms and conditions.*

*We are conducting a full review of DLO terms and conditions for operatives and Management functions.*

The above answers do not flow from the majority response which was that their had been no impact on Directly Employed Staff under BEST value either negative or otherwise. Those who felt there had invariably pointed to erosion in specific conditions while others tried to place their answers within the context of a complex and ongoing process.

## Chapter 11

### 11. Do you feel corporate assessment has led to a lessening of the burden?

*Yes (28%) No (43%) Don't Know/Other (25%) No Answer (4%)*

11.1 Those answering this question in the negative were invited to give their comments. Those answering the question negatively gave a variety of response that can be subdivided as follows:

- Scotland
- The Role of CPA
- Views of What's Happening on the Front-Line with Various Qualifications

#### Scotland

The question was not applicable to our Scottish respondents although many said they would "welcome such a process" in the future or that they were "gearing up for a comprehensive system of corporate measurement."

#### The Role of CPA

More than half of respondents made reference to the impact of CPA on corporate assessment alongside Best Value reviews. Some typical comments are cited below.

*As the CPA is all encompassing there is greater pressure to work together and ensure action plans are achieved in a timely manner.*

*There has been a tremendous effort put in to preparing for CPA. Depending on our CPA score we may face reduced levels of inspection in the long-term.*

*Best Value has widened the scope of inspection because individual Best Value reviews do not go away just because CPA now applies.*

*Individual service in our authority now get involved in more than one inspection - Ofsted, CPA, Audit Commission.*

## Views of What's Happening on the Front-Line with Various Qualifications

This third category presents a necessarily mixed picture but some of the complexities of the present set up are dealt with in the replies cited. Hopefully, these demonstrate the picture that came from the quantitative data and the qualitative responses – that corporate assessment is an uneven and somewhat incomplete process. Authorities seem keen to reform the rough edges rather than dismantle the edifice of inspection processes:

*Best Value is an excellent way to introduce performance indicators to local authorities. However, the internal administration of Best Value completely detracts from improving services and becomes a minefield of templates to fill in and reports to write. This seems to take something away from the purpose of Best Value.*

*Cross-cutting reviews are more complex and time-consuming than single service reviews. The cost of £1billion for overall Best Value/CPA nationally would be far better spent directly funding council services.*

## Chapter 12

**12. Do you feel that “labeling” councils will lead to actual improvements in service delivery?**

*Yes (53%) No (40%) Other (3%) No Answer (4%)*

**12.1 Those answering in the negative were asked to comment upon their responses.**

At the outset it is vital to take account of the fact that the majority of respondents did feel that “labeling” would result in improved services. A sizeable minority responded in the negative and it is their responses that we consider now if only to illuminate areas of concern and to establish just where improvement to the overall assessment regime is sought. The responses can be sub-divided into two categories of concern:

- The stigmatising After Effects of “Labelling” Councils and their Services.
- Concerns with the over-simplicity of the existing regime

### The Stigmatising After Effects of “Labelling” Councils and Their Services

This survey is essentially about perceptions of Best Value from those working in local government. Perhaps nowhere has the force of perception been more revealing and far reaching for local authorities than in CPA where a “poor” rating is very difficult to live down due to the enduring image it may engender – even if this does not reflect an often complex reality. The following responses follow this theme:

*Reporting by the local press had led to the perception that all services within this authority are poor. This is certainly not the case but it will be difficult to change this perception; staff morale is low and those areas that do provide a good service have an uphill battle to reinstate the image.*

*The CPA merely stigmatizes those Councils who have been labeled poorly performing when even an ‘excellent’ rating is not necessarily a reliable indicator of end-service quality. A more tangible mechanism for improving services would have been direct funding to the tune of £1 billion spent on Best Value and CPA.*

*CPA has created enormous problems with recruitment and retention because “mud sticks.” This, in turn, impacts upon organisational morale.*

*The 'labelling' of Councils is 'fodder' for the media and opposition parties to further damage the reputation of the council. The aim should be to support the Council in improving services.*

## **Concerns Over the Simplicity of the Existing Regime**

Another prevalent concern expressed among the responses in this area concerned the over simplicity of the existing regime and especially the basis for comparing councils. Examples of some of these responses, which are well worthy of consideration by the Audit Commission and other parties, are given below:

*In some areas differential s between authorities are very tenuous. In addition, there is some concern that audits of Best Value Performance Indicators may not be consistent across the country.*

*No two authorities are the same. Each has different service profiles, standards and resident requirements. This makes service comparisons very difficult.*

*No two areas can be equally socially, economically, geographically and politically. Although CPA allows for a focus on the "big picture" it will be local voices that improve services.*

*The potential is always there to learn from best practice but it is always difficult to make comparisons between Councils due to countless factors.*

*It will be the agreed improvement plans, freedoms and flexibilities, and interventions to assist authorities that will lead to improvement, not the actual rating. Many authorities seem to be falling into the trap of getting hung up on the CPA rating rather than concentrating on improvement plans and addressing actual recommendations for the long-term.*

The area of CPA, as we can see, is far from cut and dry. The stigmatising fallout from the review as well as some of the difficulties arising from the modes of comparison currently being utilised are clearly concerns among APSE members. This is not to disguise the fact that, extrapolating from the statistics, the majority feel CPA will improve services. This does not, however, imply that there a more refined form of CPA would not be more welcome.

## Conclusions

This study makes fairly clear that Best Value is widely seen as an accepted fact of life for most councils but a process in need of fine tuning. The survey offers no absolute conclusions for Best Value is still evolving but it does, hopefully, demonstrate the variety of methods in which reforms can be implemented and in which Councils can adapt themselves to a changing environment. What does seem clear from the study is that sharing best practice and networking is an invaluable in trying to soften the blow of often difficult changes and in preventing feelings of isolation taking hold in service areas and Councils where progress has been uneven. The trend towards service integration and a more strategic response to public service delivery is also prominent throughout the study. As Best Value seeps into the fabric of day to day activity across local authorities it would seem that the process is increasingly viewed as a means of promoting in-house services with high standards rather than an impediment to their development. This underscores a new self-confidence across local authorities (and evident in many responses) about meeting new challenges and reacting positively to change.

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