

The IDeA has just published 'Making Best Value work - a practical guide to managing successful Best Value reviews'. Catherine Forbes, IDeA Knowledge editor, takes a look.

Why is it the word 'regime' has crept into the language we use about Best Value? With its implications of a system enforced from above, the word reflects the increasingly bad press that Best Value attracts. But it wasn't like that in the beginning.

The point of Best Value was to give local authorities the tools to implement change and improve services themselves. So can we return to those ideals? Perhaps we can.

'Making Best Value work' does two important things. It places the initiative in a wider context, as part of a broad framework of improvement and modernisation. It also offers a model Best Value review, the 'practical guide' of the title.

The main point the publication makes is that Best Value can and should be dynamic and positive, not negative and resource intensive. And the structure of the guide reflects that - it has been designed so that readers can pick and mix learning across chapters, rather than having to read the whole thing through.

When they'd put together a first draft of the guide, the IDeA's Best Value team invited in a group of Best Value project managers and asked them for their experiences of managing reviews - what worked and what went wrong. An hour in they threw away the draft and started again. Nick Walkley, senior Best Value consultant at the IDeA recalls that day:

'One of the most important things that came out of that discussion was the importance of staff involvement in a Best Value review. It's people not plans that deliver Best Value, and local authorities need a better understanding of the skills and resources within their own staff. Best Value should be able to bring those resources to bear on service improvement.

'If a review is going to have any value, then, it must get buy-in from the local authority staff. What we're talking about here is a change in culture, in the way people do things rather than in those things themselves.'

True to that, 'Making Best Value work' includes a series of methods to engage staff more fully, and guidance on how to develop a successful culture of delivery improvement.

The publication is aimed at anyone working on or managing a review, and anyone in the corporate centre. It's also important for elected members and other local government stakeholders, as it locates Best Value effectively within the wider modernising agenda.

Improvement comes from within. We can't 'inspect in' Best Value. This publication is a reflection of that. And as Nick Raynsford says in his introduction: 'The task is challenging, but the prize - in the form of excellent public services - is the least that local people deserve'.