



Briefing:

Experience to date

This note summarises the experience to date of addressing sustainable development in:

- Comprehensive Performance Assessments
- Best Value reviews
- Best Value performance plans

And through dedicated

- Sustainable development Best Value reviews.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

The first round of CPA for single tier and county councils took place in 2002. It offered an exciting opportunity to assess the overall sustainable development performance of single tier and county councils.

CPA combines an assessment of individual service performance with a corporate assessment. According to the Audit Commission, “the corporate assessment measures a council’s overall ability. It:

- examines the council as a whole, rather than its constituent parts
- assesses community leadership and engagement issues
- addresses cross-cutting issues in a way that is not fully picked up through individual service judgements.”¹

The corporate assessment’s focus on community leadership and cross-cutting issues makes it the primary vehicle for assessing sustainable development performance. The council’s overall ability was assessed by:

- a self-assessment by the local authority *followed by:*

¹ *The Final CPA Framework for Single Tier and County Councils 2002*, Audit Commission, 2002.

- a corporate assessment by a team of inspectors.

For their self-assessment, single tier and county councils were asked to write a brief report answering four key questions (see box 1). The Corporate Assessment Team (CAT) inspectors were asked to first analyse the authority's self-assessment, and then collect additional evidence on the same four 'top level questions' with nine accompanying themes (see box 1).²

Box 1: Self-assessment and corporate assessment top level questions and accompanying themes

- 1 What is the council trying to achieve? (1 Ambitions, 2 Focus and 3 Prioritisation)
- 2 How has the council set about delivering its priorities? (4 Capacity and 5 Performance Management)
- 3 What has the council achieved to date? (6 Achievement and 7 Investment)
- 4 In the light of what the council has learned what does it plan to do next? (8 Learning and 9 Future plans)

Government advice is that local authorities should be pursuing sustainable development. (See the briefing "[Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners](#)" in the 'Sustainable development defined' Resources area.) In addition most local authorities have sustainable development (often under a different name such as *quality of life* or *local agenda 21*) as a corporate priority. It should therefore have been automatically identified in both self and corporate assessments under question 1 (*What is the council trying to achieve?*) and consequently considered within questions 2 to 4.

In 2002, WWF-UK commissioned research into how well the first round of CPA addressed sustainable development.³ The research used three methods:

- a short questionnaire emailed to the officer who leads on sustainable development for all single tier and county councils. 41 (27%) of questionnaires were returned
- telephone interviews with a sample of 10 officers who lead on sustainable development
- a review of 20 corporate assessment reports.

The research found that while some self-assessments and corporate assessments mentioned sustainable development, overall coverage was weak.

- 1 The majority (two-thirds) of self-assessments failed to consider sustainable development.
- 2 Nine out of the 10 interviewees (90%) said that they contributed information to the officers who were preparing the self-assessment, but only three eventually included any information on sustainable development activities and / or performance.

² *Corporate assessment – Key Lines of Enquiry*, Audit Commission, August 2002.

³ *How well does CPA address Sustainable Development Performance?* CAG Consultants for WW-UK. Available on the WWF website at www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/CPAreport.pdf.

- 3 Few (22%) of the corporate assessment teams (inspectors) investigated local authorities' sustainable development performance, and the approach of those that did tended to be very cursory.
- 4 Just over a third (35%) of corporate assessment reports failed to notice that authorities had sustainable development (or a related idea) in their corporate plans or strategies.
- 5 Only 20% of the corporate assessment reports commented on sustainable development achievement or performance management, but even with these there were weaknesses that indicated that inspectors did not fully understand the concept of sustainable development.
- 6 Just over half of the interviewees thought that CPA would have a negative influence on the priority that councils give to sustainable development, with the remainder saying that they thought the impact had been neutral.

But there were some good experiences too. In three cases inspectors raised the issue of sustainable development even when it had not been mentioned in the authority's own self-assessment. As one respondent commented, "I was quite surprised at the omission of sustainable development in our self-assessment given the weight it carries in council priorities and strategies, however it was one of the first areas requested by the CPA inspectors on their arrival."

The research also found two examples where the inspectors held meetings on sustainable development. In these councils they:

- 1 organised focus groups on each of the corporate aims, including sustainability: two focus groups were held – one for officers and one for external stakeholders involved in sustainable development
- 2 held a meeting with the sustainable development coordinator and the executive member for the environment: this discussed structures, how priorities were selected, resources, work areas, and work to mainstream sustainable development within the community plan.

An important conclusion of this research is that if local authorities address sustainable development within their self-assessments, then it is also much more likely to be considered by inspectors. The end result is a much better chance that CPA will lead to improvements in sustainable development performance. The briefing "[Addressing sustainable development within CPA self-assessment and Best Value](#)" suggests how local authorities can address sustainable development within their self-assessments.

Best Value reviews

Although the original Best Value Circular⁴ advised local authorities to “give effect the principles of sustainable development” within Best Value, the government did not issue any further guidance on how this should be done. Local authorities had to find their own way, assisted by advice from the Local Government Association (LGA)⁵, the Society for Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)⁶, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)⁷, and Global to Local.⁸

This advice appeared at different stages in the evolution of Best Value. The 1998 LGA guide was published before Circular 10/99 and the SOLACE advice before anything had been published on local authority practice in this field.

Local authorities have tried two complementary approaches:

- considering sustainable development within all Best Value reviews
- sustainable development reviews.

This section describes authorities’ experience of the first of these.

IDeA study

An IDeA study conducted during 2000-2001⁹ investigated what English and Welsh local authorities had been doing to promote sustainable development through Best Value, the barriers that they faced, and the support that they needed. The project was jointly funded by the DETR and supported by the LGA. As part of the IDeA study a survey was conducted early in 2001. It primarily considered how sustainable development was being treated within service reviews. It included:

- 25 telephone interviews with Best Value and sustainable development officers
- three focus groups held with regional groupings of Best Value and sustainable development officers
- 16 telephone interviews with review team members
- an email request to all English local authorities for examples of good practice.

The IDeA study found that many local authorities had considered sustainable development within Best Value, but progress appeared patchy. Some authorities had simply included a short piece in their Best Value manual and clearly made no attempt to encourage review teams to take this seriously. Others had been busy with training and the active involvement of sustainable development officers (SDO).

⁴ Local Government Act 1999: Part 1 Best Value. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Circular 10/99, December 1999.

⁵ *Integrating Sustainable Development into Best Value*, Local Government Association / IDeA, 1998. (Out of print.)

⁶ *Sustainable Development Checklist for Best Value Reviews*, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), 2000. Available at www.solace.org.uk

⁷ *Promoting Sustainable Development through Best Value*, IDeA supported by DETR and LGA, 2001.

⁸ *Building Sustainability into Best Value*, Global to Local and the Government Office for London, November 2001.

⁹ *Promoting Sustainable Development through Best Value*, IDeA supported by DETR and LGA, 2001.

Many authorities said that they had only just started to make a serious effort to consider sustainable development, now that they were further into the Best Value process.

Checklists

The most popular approach was the use of sustainable development checklists at the baseline assessment or challenge stages of each Best Value review. Checklists were frequently included in the in-house Best Value guide, often with the council's sustainable development or environmental policy. An adapted version (often simplified) of the SOLACE checklist was most commonly used by interviewees. Some had used the LGMB 13 themes¹⁰ or the revised DETR 17 themes¹¹. A few had derived checklists from their LA21 strategy or sustainable development policy, the community strategy or a community checklist.

The checklists predominantly encompassed social, economic and environmental concerns, although a few authorities focused purely on environmental issues. A small number of authorities emphasised the identification of major or *significant* impacts (see the briefing "[Addressing sustainable development within CPA self-assessment and Best Value](#)"), but most skipped this step. [NEEDS UPDATED NAME AND CONTENT FOR THIS URL]

Sustainable development checklists were often applied alongside other corporate objectives or challenges. For example review teams were commonly asked to consider corporate challenges to reduce social exclusion, improve access and meet the needs of culturally diverse populations. These typically duplicated parts of the sustainable development checklist, and could be confusing for review teams. There were a few examples of authorities that merged these into a single checklist to cover all corporate objectives.

Example from practice: [Stockport MBC](#) used a single quality of life appraisal checklist in its Best Value reviews that was derived from the themes of its community strategy.

The four Cs

There was little evidence that the sustainability impacts identified through the checklist exercise were systematically considered within the four Cs. Where sustainability improvements were identified, this was usually achieved by identifying sustainability impacts early on in the review and thinking up ways of improving performance, often with the SDO. The study found no examples where proposals for improved sustainable development performance were derived from consultation and benchmarking.

Training for review teams

Only a third of the authorities interviewed had provided, or had definite plans to provide, training on sustainable development for review team members. This was sometimes included as part of general Best Value training, occasionally as separate compulsory training and more frequently as separate voluntary training.

Example from practice: [Bedford District Council](#) used its sustainable development action planning workshops for staff to support Best Value reviews.

¹⁰ *The Sustainability Indicators Research Project*, LGMB, 1994.

¹¹ *Sustainable Communities for the 21st Century*, DETR, 1998.

The role of sustainable development officers or champions in reviews

A few SDOs found themselves leading or deeply involved in 'environment led' reviews, typically waste management. Only four of the SDOs surveyed had taken an active role across the Best Value process. But among the good practice case studies that were identified for the study, the active involvement of SDOs or SD 'champions' was very common. SD 'champions' varied across authorities, they included SDOs, Best Value officers, departmental representatives of inter-departmental SD working groups, and external 'experts'.

Example from practice: [Newcastle City Council](#) arranges for one of the council's sustainable development officers to meet with every Review Team at the start of the review process.

Is it having any impact?

At the time of the study, few authorities could point to any genuine examples of improvement in sustainability performance as a result of Best Value. But this is not surprising given that many year one reviews had yet to prepare their action plans, let alone implement these. In this respect sustainable development was very little different from other aspects of performance improvement in the early days of Best Value.

Over a third of review team members felt that by following a systematic process they had identified new opportunities to improve sustainability performance. On the other hand, half of these felt that they would have identified the improvements anyway. Some commented that, while the process did not throw up anything that would not have been considered, it did provide them with a justification for taking initiatives forward.

On the plus side, several authorities noted that while tangible improvements were not yet visible, the process of considering sustainable development within Reviews had undoubtedly heightened awareness of sustainable development and how it impinges on all local authority activities.

The Pathfinders Project

Towards the end of 2001, the IDeA and LGA established a Best Value and Sustainable Development Pathfinders Project. Local authorities were invited to submit expressions of interest in joining the project, and 12 were selected. The first meeting of the pathfinder authorities was held in January 2002 and the project lasted for a year. A final report summarising the experience and lessons from the project will be posted on IDeA Knowledge, www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk. Links will be available from both the Best Value and Mainstreaming Sustainability sections of the site.

Soon after the project commenced, CPA appeared on the horizon. The Pathfinders commented on draft CPA guidance from the Audit Commission, and also experimented with sustainable development scrutiny. The latter is covered in the 'New structures' Resources area.

A central conclusion of the project was that, to be fully effective, activities to promote sustainable development through Best Value and CPA need to be supported by much broader sustainable development structures within the authority. The draft project report sets out the Pathfinders' conclusions on the ideal circumstances (the benchmark) for promoting sustainable development within an authority (see box below).

The final Pathfinders report will discuss the problems that the project found exist in practice to promoting sustainable development through Best Value and scrutiny, and suggest ways of dealing with these. It will also include case studies that illustrate what was tried.

Best Value and Sustainable Development Pathfinders Project

The ideal circumstances for promoting sustainable development within Best Value and Improvement

- 1 The authority has a clear policy statement endorsing the principles of sustainable development. There is cross party support for the principles. This is underpinned by strong political leadership and demonstrated commitment in practice. The authority's corporate position takes into account the collective view of the LSP.
- 2 There is widespread understanding of sustainable development throughout the authority. People understand the words 'sustainable development' (or alternatives used in the authority) and there is common and consistent use of language. Beyond this, people have and use a broader concept of improvement (which includes sustainable development, equalities etc.) and this underpins the mental models people use to understand performance and improvement and the way that plans, systems and procedures are set up and described.
- 3 The local strategic partnership understands the implications of sustainable development, especially the need to consider the impact of their decisions on future generations and global communities as well as on local people. This is reflected in the community strategy, which takes an integrated approach (see the briefing "[Policy integration](#)" in the 'Sustainable development defined' Resources area) to promoting sustainable development.
- 4 Sustainable development is incorporated within the whole corporate management framework, from the community strategy, through the corporate plan, service plans, and individual plans and targets. It is integrated into objective setting, monitoring and action. Even if the specific words 'sustainable development' are not used, the principles are incorporated. Best Value and CPA are not seen as separate, add-on activities but as one tool amongst a number, integrated within a single, coherent strategic and performance management process.
- 5 There is an explicit focus on doing things differently and better, as opposed to regular provision of services. It includes reviewing services and cross cutting themes (whether as a Best Value review, scrutiny review, or some other form of review), drawing up and agreeing improvement plans, and implementing them. Mechanisms are in place for ensuring that sustainable development is effectively promoted within CPA self-assessments, Best Value and scrutiny reviews.
- 6 Active use is made of a comprehensive and meaningful set of sustainable development or quality of life indicators. These are used in partnership with others who can influence outcomes, probably through the LSP. Local people are interested in and involved with the indicators (possibly developing or critiquing them). There are clear mechanisms for ensuring that sustainable development indicators inform decision-making. Sustainable development targets and indicators are fully incorporated into the Best Value performance plan.

Best Value performance plans

The IDeA study found that a small minority of local authorities included a sustainable development or environmental protection section in their Best Value performance plan (BVPP). These appeared to predominantly rely on a selection of national Best Value performance indicators. Local performance indicators (whether or not relating to sustainable development

performance) were still in their early stages. Four authorities included local sustainability indicators in the BVPP, and one included quality of life indicators derived from the Audit Commission's list.¹² Many BVPPs fail to make a connection between trends in sustainable development (quality of life) indicators and proposals for improvements in the authority's performance improvement plan.

Example from practice: [Newark and Sherwood District Council's](#) year two local performance plan (LPP) contained key objectives relating to the recommendations arising from its sustainability position statement. In the LPP performance against the key objectives is recorded as 'achieved', 'not achieved' or 'in progress' with a line of explanation.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS

A small number of local authorities have undertaken what are described as sustainable development, Local Agenda 21 or environmental stewardship Best Value reviews. The Audit Commission commissioned a survey of these reviews towards the end of 2001.¹³

Different types of reviews

Some were service reviews of the section or staff that are dedicated to promoting sustainable development or environmental stewardship across the authority. Others were 'multi-service' reviews covering several services that are considered particularly important for the environment. About half were cross-cutting reviews that considered how well national and local sustainable development policies were being pursued across the authority. Some of these considered purely corporate *processes* for promoting sustainable development. Others also assessed sustainable development *outcomes*. The table below summarises the different approaches taken for sustainable development reviews.

TYPES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW
Single service
1 Narrow service Considers current activities of sustainable development/Local Agenda 21 unit, eg EMAS implementation, awareness raising, and asks if these activities are being undertaken efficiently, effectively, economically, and benchmarks with authorities undertaking similar activities.
2 Broad service Asks whether the sustainable development/LA21 unit would be more effective if it shifted the emphasis of its activities. Benchmarks with authorities that have sustainable development/Local Agenda 21 units with different approaches.
Multi-service
3 Multi-service environmental stewardship Reviews the performance of a range of typical environmental services such as transport, waste and environmental health.
Corporate cross-cutting
4 Process cross-cutting

¹² *Voluntary Quality of Life and Cross-Cutting Indicators, April 2001 to March 2002*, Audit Commission.

¹³ *Survey of Sustainable Development and other Cross-Cutting Reviews*, Audit Commission, March 2002.

Considers the processes that the authority has instituted to promote sustainable development and asks how efficient, effective and economic these are. Benchmarks with family/network authorities, and/or 'best in class'.

5 Process + selected outcome cross-cutting

As 3, but also selects a sample of service based activities for further investigation. Latter selected either for: their importance to sustainable development; apparent poor sustainability performance; or contribution to national sustainable development targets.

6 Outcome cross-cutting

Asks if the authority is fulfilling national, regional and local sustainable development policy. Benchmarks as much against policies and targets as against other authorities.

7 Outcome cross-cutting + partners

As 5 but includes key partners such as health authority, business organisations, utilities, statutory agencies.

Example from practice: [Powys County Council](#)'s Local Agenda 21 review examined the work of the Council's Local Futures service. This was primarily a broad service review.

Example from practice: [Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council](#)'s sustainable development review considered: internal support for sustainability; external education and promotion; and joint working with other organisations. This was primarily a process review.

Example from practice: [The London Borough of Sutton](#)'s environmental sustainability review considered corporate processes for promoting sustainable development, but also examined progress against several of the council's targets, including promoting the use of sustainable materials and resources and promoting healthy lifestyles. This was a process and selected outcomes review.

Some councils have been using environmental management systems (EMAS/ISO14001) as a systematic way of managing environmental stewardship Best Value Reviews. The IDEa has published advice on this approach.¹⁴

Are sustainable development Best Value reviews necessary?

Many of the improvement actions arising from Best Value reviews are for the implementation of widely accepted corporate sustainable development good practice, eg:

- prepare sustainable development action plan
- appoint sustainable development coordinator
- monitor sustainability performance
- staff training
- Environmental management systems
- integrate sustainable development within Best Value
- integrate sustainable development into procurement.

¹⁴ *Improving Environmental Performance within the Best Value Process. Practical Guidance for Local Authorities*, IdeA, 2002.

The impression is that the reviews are still at the stage of putting recommended corporate practice into place, rather than delving into whether this practice is achieving genuine outcomes. Specific advice on how services could improve their sustainable development performance is rarely covered even though this could be argued to be the ultimate *raison d'être* of sustainable development Best Value reviews. This is as much true of the cross-cutting as the service based sustainable development reviews.

The improvement plans echo the original motive for sustainable development reviews. Often the motive was not as for most Best Value reviews, to look at the detail of how delivery could be improved, but simply to get some more delivery in place.

This begs the question of whether a resource intensive Best Value review is really necessary, when a simple comparison with a checklist of good sustainable development practice might lead to the same conclusions. Although the latter may seem more logical, it apparently does not carry the authority of an (inspected) Best Value review. One local authority observed that its sustainable development review provided vital ammunition to remove a number of long standing blockages to progress.

Effective reviews

There has been limited experience of sustainable development reviews, but evidence so far suggests that the most effective reviews:

- are cross-cutting rather than service based, because sustainable development crosses all local authority activities
- focus on (at least a sample of) outputs, because process alone can not demonstrate that the local authority is delivering sustainable development results
- have broad inter-departmental review teams, with external critical friends from other local authorities and/or a local sustainable development forum or relevant NGO
- consult staff, elected members and external organisations on the effectiveness of corporate sustainable development processes
- take the challenge aspect seriously and look at best practice sustainable solutions from various sources.

The survey also revealed some common weaknesses in sustainable development reviews:

- Best Value reviews should in theory review the efficiency, economy and effectiveness with which the authority is implementing corporate objectives and policies. But some sustainable development reviews primarily focused on the appropriateness of the sustainable development policy, rather than considering how well it was being delivered.
- The confusion between policy and Best Value reviews sometimes led to an unusual approach to consultation. For example, instead of consulting staff on the effectiveness of corporate sustainable development processes, the reviews 'tested' staff on their understanding of sustainable development. Frequently external stakeholders were not consulted.

- Competition was often ignored on the assumption that corporate processes can only be delivered internally. While corporate processes may be better planned internally, there may be a variety of alternative mechanisms for delivering some components.
- Of most concern was the tendency for the more ambitious cross-cutting process and outcome reviews to simply be overwhelmed by the task. A couple were abandoned and others admitted to becoming lost in the detail and losing sight of strategic goals. A good initial scoping of the review will help to reduce this problem.