



## Briefing:

# Why promote sustainable development through CPA and Best Value?

Local government's responsibility for sustainable development

Agenda 21 (Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) endorsed by 140 nations at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, recognises the essential contribution of local government to sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> The UK Sustainable Development Strategy<sup>2</sup> reiterates that:

“The Government cannot do the job alone. We need to work together, forging partnerships with business, local authorities and voluntary groups... *A better quality of life* (the UK Sustainable Development Strategy) provides a national focus from which local and regional action can follow.”

As sustainable development cuts across all local authority activities, it must be systematically promoted within all of the authority's policies and practices.

Why are CPA and Best Value crucial for promoting sustainable development?

Best Value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), along with Audit Commission inspectors, are crucial determinants of where local authorities concentrate their efforts and their future direction. If sustainable development is not considered within CPA and Best Value, then local authorities are highly likely to take unsustainable paths. Once unsustainable decisions are made it will be difficult to change course.

Both CPA and Best Value processes must consider how to translate corporate commitments (in the community strategy and elsewhere) into sustainable practice. To do this they must seek integrated solutions that promote economic, social and environmental objectives at the same time. (See the briefing “[Policy integration](#)” in the ‘Sustainable development defined’ Resources area..)

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<sup>1</sup> *Agenda 21 – Action Plan for the Next Century*, endorsed at the United Nations Conference for Environment and Development, chapter 28, para 28.3.

<sup>2</sup> *A Better Quality of Life – A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK*, DETR 1999, Summary.

CPA is the first attempt to look systematically at the overall performance of local authorities. The overall CPA score combines scores for:

- the corporate assessment
- individual service performance based on Best Value inspections
- performance indicators.

The CPA corporate assessment assesses how effectively the authority is fulfilling its community leadership role, which should include the task of promoting sustainable development. The corporate assessment is undertaken by inspectors, but builds on the self-assessment that is completed by the local authority prior to the arrival of the inspection team.

Although the attention given to Best Value reviews has declined with the advent of CPA, they remain influential in determining the future direction of council activities. Local authorities are still required to undertake Best Value reviews, and to “focus reviews on priority areas arising from their CPAs and other considerations.”<sup>3</sup> These reviews offer an invaluable opportunity to consider in more detail how selected authority activities are supporting sustainable development, and to make improvements.

#### GOVERNMENT AND AUDIT COMMISSION ADVICE

##### Comprehensive Performance Assessment

The Audit Commission advises that both self-assessments and corporate assessments should be based around four questions:

- 1 What is the council trying to achieve?
- 2 How has the council set about delivering its priorities for improvement?
- 3 What improvements has the council achieved / not achieved to date?
- 4 In light of what the council has learnt to date, what does it plan to do next?

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<sup>3</sup> Circular 03/2003. *Local Government Act 1999: Part 1 Best Value and Performance Improvement*, ODPM March 2003. Paragraph 44.

## CORPORATE AND SELF-ASSESSMENT KEY LINES OF ENQUIRY

### What is the council trying to achieve?

- Evidence of ambitions for improving local quality of life over the longer-term (for example in the next 5 – 10 years).
- Extent to which the ambitions are realistic or robust.
- Extent to which the ambitions have been determined by working with partners and the community, for example through the local strategic partnership and community strategy.
- Extent to which the council gives and is seen to give, clear leadership to strategies to build cohesive and sustainable communities.
- Effectiveness of leadership within the organisation to ensure ambitions are clearly understood and owned by all members and staff.

Several Audit Commission documents refer to the key lines of enquiry (KLOE) that underpin these four questions. The latest advice on KLOE to district councils<sup>4</sup> notes that the inspection focus under question one – *what is the council trying to achieve* – should include the KLOE in the box above.

Essentially the Audit Commission advice is that: local authorities' must consider in their self-assessment whether they have realistic and robust ambitions developed in partnership with the local strategic partnership as expressed in the community strategy; and secondly how well they are delivering these.

Government guidance on community strategies<sup>5</sup> states:

- i) The overall objective of community strategies is to: “improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of each area in its inhabitants, and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK”.
- ii) One of the four aims of a community strategy is to: “contribute to the achievement of sustainable development both locally and more widely, with the local goals and priorities relating, where appropriate, to local, national and even global aims.”

The self-assessment and corporate assessments should therefore consider:

- how effectively sustainable development is promoted in the community strategy
- if and how effectively (sustainable development) commitments in the community strategy are followed through into the local authority's policies and practice.

Best Value and performance improvement

The Local Government Act 1999 established the legal framework for Best Value. It stated that local authorities “shall have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State under this

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<sup>4</sup> See for example *Self-Assessment Guidance for District Councils*, Audit Commission, April 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Preparing Community Strategies. Government Guidance to Local Authorities*, 8 December 2000. [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk)

Section”. Subsequently guidance was issued as Government Circular 10/99<sup>6</sup>. This made several important statements on sustainable development.

The recently revised *Best Value and Performance Improvement* Circular from ODPM<sup>7</sup> again reminds local authorities that they must consider sustainable development within Best Value:

“It is also clear that more needs to be done to consider the impact of authorities’ actions on future generations. This is not just the prerogative of national government or national institutions. Local government has a key role to play. As community leaders, local authorities are expected to work for the long-term well being of their communities, recognising that actions taken locally may have wider impacts and contribute to damaging developments such as global warming. Sustainable development is fundamental to Best Value, and should be reflected in authorities’ programmes of reviews, the review process itself and improvement planning.” (Paragraph 26.)

The Government therefore expects local authorities to consider their impact on sustainable development within Best Value and improvement planning.

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<sup>6</sup> *Local Government Act 1999: Part 1 Best Value*. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Circular 10/99, December 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Circular 03/2003. *Local Government Act 1999: Part 1 Best Value and Performance Improvement*, ODPM March 2003.