

6. DETAILED SERVICE REVIEWS

6.1 THE REQUIREMENT FOR DETAILED REVIEWS

All local authorities are under a statutory requirement to review their functions. As the requirement to review all services on a five-year cycle has now been revoked, it allows the Council to focus reviews on the shared priorities agreed by Government and the LGA (See Section 2 above) and local priorities identified through performance management systems and improvement planning arrangements.

“In undertaking a review an authority shall aim to improve the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. In undertaking a review an authority should:

- Consider whether it should be exercising the function.
- Consider the level at which and the way in which it should be exercising the function.
- Consider its objectives in relation to the exercise of the function.
- Assess its performance in exercising the function by reference to any performance indicator specified for the function.
- Assess the competitiveness of its performance in exercising the function by reference to the exercise of the same function by other best value authorities and by commercial and other businesses, including organisations in the voluntary sector.
- Consult other best value authorities and commercial and other businesses, including organisations in the voluntary sector, about the exercise of the function.
- Assess its success in meeting any best value performance standard which applies in relation to the function.
- Assess its progress towards meeting any relevant best value performance standard which has been specified but which does not yet apply.
- Assess its progress towards meeting any relevant best value performance target.”

Local Government Act 1999

6.2 THE PURPOSE OF DETAILED REVIEWS

Whilst the ongoing assessment of services described in Section 5 above is concerned with assessing the strengths and weaknesses of individual service areas (through comparisons with key performance indicators, reference to user feedback etc.), **detailed reviews are intended to identify *how* services might be improved.**

Improvements might be achieved in a variety of ways. For example, new systems or procedures might be introduced to improve quality or efficiency, to reduce costs, or to enhance the standard of provision to service users.

Detailed reviews identify opportunities for improvement by taking an in-depth look at the way in which services are delivered.

Potential improvements identified by best value reviews must be translated into performance targets and action plans must be developed to ensure the achievement of such targets. The Council must monitor and report publicly (through the Best Value Performance Plan) on the achievement or non-achievement of these targets.

6.3 THE FOUR KEY COMPONENTS OF REVIEWS (“The four C’s”)

The four fundamental requirements in undertaking detailed reviews are to:

- **Compare** process and performance of others across a range of relevant indicators taking into account the views of both service users and potential suppliers.
- **Consult** local taxpayers, service users, partners and the wider business community, the voluntary sector, social enterprises, staff and Trade Unions, to find their views on current service provision, opportunities for improvement and setting new performance targets
- **Challenge** why, how and by whom a service is being provided – is the service needed, does it reflect corporate priorities, should we be providing it and if so, are we doing so in a well managed, effective and efficient way?
- Use fair and open **competition** where practicable as a means of securing efficient and effective services.

The Local Government Act (1999) makes clear that where carried through successfully reviews will be the principal means by which authorities consider new approaches to service delivery and set the demanding performance targets that will deliver continuous improvement.

Guidance on meeting these four key requirements is set out in Section 7 below.

6.4 THE COUNTY COUNCIL’S PROGRAMME OF DETAILED REVIEWS

The County Council’s programme of reviews is set out in the Best Value Performance Plan. Copies of the Plan and the programme are available on the Staff intranet site. The programme will be kept under regular review and the timing of individual reviews may be changed if the Council’s priorities change.

6.5 WHO WILL UNDERTAKE THE DETAILED REVIEWS?

Chief officers are responsible for determining who should undertake each review. In most cases it will be appropriate to assemble a review team. (See also Section 7.2 below on the review team).

Members of the Policy and Review Team will lead or contribute to individual reviews on a basis agreed with chief officers. The Head of the Chief Executive's Unit, reporting both to the Chief Officers Management Board (COMB) and to the relevant Scrutiny Panel will maintain an overview of progress on all reviews.

6.6 THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SUCCESSFUL REVIEWS

Guidance from ODPM and the Audit Commission on best value offers the following advice on getting the most from reviews:

“The most important lesson we've learned is to focus less on the bureaucratic processes associated with best value, important to spend less time, comparing apples with pears, and instead focus on talking to stakeholders to find out what they think should be done better, identify best practice and then focus on the improvement plans”

Service Manager : Metropolitan Council

- **Be clear about the direction of the review.** Terms of reference (or scope) help provide clarity and focus to the review. They help the review tackle fundamental challenge questions: “Why do we provide this service? Could someone else do it better?” While maintaining the focus on delivering improvement. Take time out before drafting the terms of reference to think about those areas of the service that need improvement and aim to tackle those areas during the review. Without this focus it is all too easy to become too involved in the details of the process and lose sight of the aims of best value.
- **Think about services from the perspective of users and local people.** Recent research by the Audit Commission suggests that many Council's fail to recognise the importance of focusing best value on the needs and views of the people using the service. Too often best value reviews concentrate on improving **processes** rather than the **service**. Recommendations and the action plan need to focus on, and show how, the **service** to users will improve as a result of the review.
- **Take a sufficiently long-term perspective.** Reviews will be unlikely to set targets that reflect best value unless they look far enough ahead to anticipate prospective changes in the demand for services and the means by which such services might be delivered. As far as possible, sufficient flexibility should be built into all delivery arrangements, particularly those with a term in excess of 3 years, to ensure that there are measures to secure continuous improvement and innovation and which can be adapted to meet changing local and national priorities. This flexibility must be balanced against a reasonable degree of certainty over the length of any contract to allow start-up costs, risk and investment to be managed at sensible cost.
- **Involve elected members.** Elected members – whether with executive or non-executive roles – have a key responsibility to ensure that Reviews reflect from the

start the strategic objectives and corporate priorities of the authority and focus on the perspective of actual and potential service users, including those that are typically hard-to-reach. Elected members will also need to monitor action plans following the completion of reviews.

- **Seek advice from outside the authority.** Authorities with a track record of working with partners in the public, voluntary or private sectors recognise the benefits of involving them in the review process as an additional source of advice or as a sounding board for new ideas. Other external advice can be tapped by setting up expert panels or forums, perhaps involving service users (or potential service users). And the same principle can be applied through involving members and officers who are not directly involved in the particular service or group of services being reviewed, or by involving officers from other authorities which are regarded as 'best practice'.
- **Involve those currently delivering services.** This applies to all employees, but particularly to frontline staff whose experience of face-to-face contact with the public and service users can bring an important perspective as to how a service is perceived and valued, and how it can be improved. Their support is critical to successful implementation.
- **Question existing commitments.** Where authorities are committed to longer-term contracts, there are usually provisions that enable improvements to be made in agreement with the parties concerned. Where this is not the case, authorities should still consider the scope for changes – perhaps by measures complementing the contract – and where these are justified cost any such adjustments as part of their appraisal of service delivery options.
- **Engage with users and potential users of services.** A customer focus to reviews is essential. It is important that the Council seeks out the views of all potential users, especially those who have traditionally been under-represented. Those that fail to engage local people fully from the outset – including hard-to-reach groups – will carry little conviction when it comes to explaining decisions on service targets and selected providers, and invariably overlook real opportunities to bring about lasting change.
- **Address equity considerations.** Reviews should consider the way in which services impact on all sections of the community, including minority groups, and set targets to redress disparities in the provision of services to those that are socially, economically or geographically disadvantaged. Issues of social exclusion and isolation will be important ones for many authorities, and a service cannot provide best value unless it addresses equity considerations. Reviews should explicitly consider whether the authority complies with the relevant legislation.
- **Give effect to the principles of sustainable development.** New performance targets generated by reviews need to reflect the principles of sustainable development. Where authorities have LA21 and community strategies in place, reviews will provide an opportunity to give such principles practical effect through the setting of consistent performance targets.
- **Ensure that improvement/action plans focus on service** – so much time and effort goes into carrying out a best value review that it can be tempting to relax when the review itself is almost complete. In reality this is the most important time. The action plan needs to focus on service improvement and detailed arrangements have

to be put in place to ensure the timely implementation of the various recommendations.