

Improvement Through Best Value, Inspection and Audit.

(1) Best Value Reviews 2000 to 2003

In 1999, the Council agreed a 5-year programme of Best Value Reviews in response to the requirement to review all services within that timescale. Although this requirement has been rescinded, Best Value Reviews remain a powerful tool for improvement.

The table below briefly describes the 26 reviews that have been concluded and reported to the Best Value Panel.

Year 1 (2000/2001)	Inspection status	Status of the Action Plan
Corporate IT	Full inspection	Completed
Educational Psychology	Full inspection	Completed
Training & Development	Full inspection	Completed
Highways Local Searches	Light Touch inspection	Over 75% completed or on target
Legal Services (External income)	Light Touch inspection	Completed
Legal Services (External legal fees & agents' expenses)	Light Touch inspection	Completed
Payroll Services	Light Touch inspection	Over 75% completed or on target
Pensions Administration	Light Touch inspection	Over 75% completed or on target
Reprographics	Light Touch inspection	Completed
Traffic Signals	Light Touch inspection	Over 75% completed or on target
Countryside Sites Management	Not yet inspected	Over 75% completed or on target
County Farms Estate	Not yet inspected	Completed
Pension Fund Investment	Not yet inspected	Over 75% completed or on target
Planning Development & Control	Not yet inspected	Over 75% completed or on target
Year 2 (2001/2002)		
Libraries	Full inspection	50-75% completed or on target
Trading Standards	Full inspection	Over 75% completed or on target
Scientific Services	Light Touch inspection	Less than 25% completed or on target (a new improvement plan commenced April 1 st 2003)
Pollution Control	Not yet inspected	Completed
Record Office	Not yet inspected	Over 75% completed or on target
Year 3 (2002/2003)		
Services for People with Learning Disabilities	Not yet inspected	Too soon to report
Adult & Community Learning	Not yet inspected	Too soon to report
Outdoor Education Centres	Not yet inspected	Too soon to report
Chronically Sick & Disabled People's equipment	Inspected as part of Joint Review.	50-75% completed or on target
Homes for Older People/Homecare	Inspected as part of Joint Review.	Over 75% completed or on target
Year 4 (2003/2004)		
Communications	Not yet inspected	Too soon to report
Services for People with a Physical Disability or Sensory Impairment	Not yet inspected	Too soon to report

All Best Value Reviews have delivered important lessons for the Council and the ones selected below for more detailed comment reflect their particular importance in supporting current priority objectives. Performance improvement factsheets are available in respect of all 26 reviews concluded.

Corporate Information Technology. Information and communications technology are fundamental to the whole e-government programme and within this to specific issues like the requirement to implement electronic social care records by 2004. (Best Value Inspection judgment: a fair service that is likely to improve)

Key issues identified

- The review revealed the service to be cost effective but under-resourced;
- The low staffing numbers showed scope for improvements in customer service;
- In house provision is competitive;
- There is scope for improved working methods.

Key service Improvements since the review

The Best Value Inspectors acknowledged the improvements already made within the service in terms of infrastructure, systems, software and staffing.

- User satisfaction levels have risen significantly since the survey carried out in 1999;
- Additional capital investment of £1m has been secured to improve service infrastructure, in particular network upgrading;
- Service staffing has been restructured and increased by 14 FTE;
- The Helpdesk has been re-organised to ensure that appropriate advice and support is available to callers;
- The introduction of new hardware and software;
- The introduction of a Service Level Agreement between IBS and customer directorates.

Educational Psychology The review concluded that this service provided a high level of support to schools and that the service is an important support to raising attainment levels in schools. (Best Value Inspection judgment: a good service with promising prospects for continued improvement)

Key issues identified

The review concluded that the service provided is a good one at low cost. It employs significantly less staff than other authorities (our statistical neighbours). The (Ofsted) Best Value Inspection team found that the review had a significant impact on the expertise, management and deployment of the service. Consultation showed that schools see the staff in the service as highly professional, with a high number believing that the Educational Psychologists add value to the progress of children.

The Inspection Team recommended that:

- Service planning be improved by the sequencing of all actions within plans, and by the clear linking of success criteria to performance indicators set out within the Council's plans;
- Continue to improve the deployment of staff to schools by making the criteria for allocation explicit;

- Plan for the further delegation of services to schools by exploring the range of service delivery options available.

Key service Improvements since the review

- an improvement in the specialist skills and links to SEN provision;
- better collaborative working with the Learning & Behaviour Support Service;
- support is targeted more effectively at those schools with the greatest need;
- there has been increased specialist support for special schools;
- planning has improved, including links with inter-agency and inter-service plans.

Training and Development our staff are our most valuable asset and development opportunities remain the soundest way of ensuring high quality, publicly supported services. (Best Value Inspection judgment: a good service that will improve)

Key issues identified by inspection

- The Council should develop and implement a service procurement strategy;
- Undertake a needs analysis to determine the support required by each Directorate to implement the corporate approach to training and development;
- Fully implement the training and development cycle throughout the Council;
- Develop a monitoring system to ensure that line managers apply the corporate approach;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of training and development activities from a public perspective.

Key service Improvements since the review

- An Evaluation Protocol is in place for all development and training activities;
- Directorate and organisation wide needs have been aligned with training objectives mainly through the Development and Training Forum;
- A procurement strategy for development and training has been adopted in line with the Council's Procurement Code;
- Services to customers has improved through the development of a dedicated staff training site on the intranet;
- The centrality of the "training cycle" has been built into the operation of training across the organisation.

Libraries Libraries serve the people of Worcestershire by providing access to information on all subjects, and contribute to the life of the community by providing books, spoken word cassettes, CDs, videos, DVDs, computerised information and internet services. Libraries play a significant part in lifelong learning and promoting social inclusion (Best Value Inspection judgment: a good service that has excellent prospects for continued improvement)

Key issues identified

- Worcestershire Library services are effective and valued;
- It is the lowest resourced service within the (audit) family of similar authorities;
- Government library standards are to be met by April 2004;
- Increased opening hours and service points are needed;
- Increased investment is needed in books and other materials;
- Shabby and worn out buildings and equipment are not attractive to the public, the authority is not giving modern service delivery or good working conditions;
- Marketing, promotion and the performance management of stock and services must be improved;
- Information services based on ICT should be developed;
- Service income must be increased through diversifying income streams and improved management;
- Effectiveness is limited by inadequate staffing structures.

Key service Improvements since the review

An Improvement Plan was drawn up to address the areas for development highlighted by the review, and the Council allocated an additional £¼ m in 2002/2003 to help make the improvements.

The Best Value Inspectors noted that good progress has been made in the following areas:

- Vital Villages work on setting up mini libraries;
- Introduction of a mobile ICT Learning Centre;
- A new mobile library, with access for people with physical disabilities, is in service;
- DVD pilot projects have begun.

Residential Homes for Older People and Homecare Residential provision and home care represent different ends of the spectrum of care available to older and other vulnerable people. It is essential to get the balance of provision right and past evidence shows that in Worcestershire, our residential provision was too high and helping support people in their own homes was too low. (Inspected through the Joint Review process – serving some people well with excellent prospects for improvement)

Key issues identified

- The Council spends less on older people than most of its family of like councils and spending on homecare is particularly low;
- The unit costs of the Council's homecare and residential care are unexceptional compared to those of like councils, although unit costs of the Homecare Service are high compared to those of independent providers;
- Levels of sickness and downtime in the services are not excessive, although there may be room for improvement;
- Limited evidence is available by which the relative quality of the services compared to the independent sector can be assessed;

- Service users showed a very high level of satisfaction with the Homecare Service and with their homecarers and a high level of satisfaction with the reliability of the service;
- Service user satisfaction levels with the Residential Care Service were also high, with evidence of improvement between the surveys carried out in 2000 and in 2001;
- Externalisation of the services to reduce costs and improve efficiency is superficially attractive, but in the medium term at least is unlikely to be the best way forward;
- Whilst the radical change and upheaval of a major externalisation is not appropriate at this time, there is a need for major change to the way in which the services are provided;
- The reconstitution of the services as an Independent Business Unit with a much clearer purchaser/provider relationship underpinned by a clear contract or Service Level Agreement;
- The exposure of the services to more competitive pressure, by requiring them to compete with the independent sector for new business and by an annual negotiation process with care purchasers over the volume and quality of services to be delivered.

Key service Improvements since the review

- The 3 residential homes for older people have all been awarded the Chartermark, which recognises the commitment of the service to quality and improvement;
- A draft Commissioning Strategy has been issued, and work has commenced on a detailed Purchasing Strategy for Homecare services for the next three years;
- Joint Health/Social Services Single Assessment process has been developed and is being tested at pilot sites throughout the County;
- New partnership structure agreed, including a new locality structure for Older People and Physical Disability Services;
- In 2002/3 the Older Persons budget was increased by a further £2.3M. This money was used to increase the range of day and domiciliary services (in particular dementia care and rehabilitation) and to fund the rising cost of nursing and residential care places;
- Additional resources have been identified within the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan to fund the commitment (contained in our Public Service Agreement) to improve performance in assisting older people in Worcestershire to live as independently as possible;
- The services are being reconstituted as a Business Unit and will operate under a trading account for the financial year 2002/3 onwards;
- Work is progressing on new Service Level Agreements, a review of the management structure of the services, a review of the terms and conditions of staff and registration of the services by the National Care Standards Commission;
- Performance against the relevant Best Value Performance Indicators has improved (BVPI 53 and BVPI 54).

Chronically Sick and Disabled People Equipment The timely provision of equipment to support daily living is vital in helping people with disabilities remain independent for as long as possible. Historically, Worcestershire's service was very poor in terms of delivery speed. (Inspected through the Joint Review process – serving some people well with excellent prospects for improvement)

Key issues identified

- More people could be supported at home through the re-introduction of standard eligibility criteria;
- To be truly integrated, the service needs to encompass assessment, purchasing and storage, charging and IT systems.

Key service Improvements since the review

The Council and the health authority jointly prepared the action plan following the review.

- Changes implemented since the Interim Report in October 2001 (particularly the move to standard stock, an “in time” purchasing system and retrospective charging) have resulted in a significant improvement in performance against BVPI 56;
- This indicator measures the percentage of equipment costing less than £1000 delivered within 3 weeks. The Service’s performance has risen from 62% in 1999/2000 to 97.89% in 2002/2003 and should be sustained at or around this level.

Financial Services

The Financial Services Directorate has undertaken Best Value Reviews of the following services:

- Payroll Services;
- Pension Fund Administration;
- Pension Fund Investment.

As a result of the Reviews a number of administrative improvements have been identified and implemented in line with the Best Value principles of increased efficiency and effectiveness and continuous improvement. These include a significant increase in the number of transactions carried out electronically, links made to external systems, improved customer liaison and ongoing procedural reviews. The Pension Fund Investment Management was market tested in 2002 and new managers were appointed.

Two of the Reviews, the Payroll Service and the Pension Fund Administration, have received Light Touch inspections by the Audit Commission which resulted in the following comments from the Inspectors:

▪ Payroll Services Summary

‘The review of the Payroll service was carried out to address the threat posed by a reducing client base. It showed that the service is currently performing well and the Council staff we met onsite endorsed this view. The review was used effectively to identify areas for improvement and these have been picked up in the Improvement Plan. There is clear commitment to the improvements in the Plan, which is monitored at service level.’

▪ Pensions Administration Summary

‘This statutory service is well thought of by its members. Although the scope of the review was limited, there was a thorough consideration of the 4 Cs, and this led to some key areas for improvement being identified. There is clear commitment within the team to the improvements in the Plan, which is monitored at service level; scheme members have commented on improvements, such as the newsletter.’

(2) Response to Recommendations made by Auditors in Relation to the 2001/2002 Best Value Performance Plan.

The actions noted below were reported to Council and made publicly available within the 30 days specified. Since then, councils have received new guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in which it states that estimated financial data will no longer be acceptable.

Recommendations (a), (b) and (c) are statutory recommendations as outlined in Appendix A of the Auditors Report on the 2002/2003 Best Value Performance Plan. The remaining (d to f) are residual recommendations relating to those contained in the 2001/2002 Auditors report.

Recommendation	Action	Timescale
(a) The Council should review and seek to improve its systems for recording data for BVPIs 102, 117 and 174 in time for the production of the 2003/04 BVPP.	(a) upon further investigation and discussion with PWC, it has been agreed that the reservation in relation to BVPI 102 does not apply. (b) BVPI 117 – systems now in place to ensure data is collected appropriately (c) BVPI 174 systems now in place to ensure data is collected appropriately.	(a) no action required (b) by 30/6/03 (c) by 30/6/03
(b) The Council should review the incidence of estimated performance information included in the 2002/03 BVPP and make plans to include actual information in future years, where this is feasible. (35 PI's – attached)	The attached sheet details the 35 performance indicators with comment on each. The aim is for publication of actuals on 30/6/03 but all performance indicators relying on finance outturn data will likely remain as estimates on that date.	By 30/6/03
(c) Where it is necessary to include indicators in the BVPP based on estimated information, the Council should ensure that these indicators are flagged and a procedure is put in place to update them for actual information, prior to the commencement of the audit process.	Systems are now being established to specifically track groups of performance indicators including those containing estimated values	By August 2003 (or date of audit)
(d) The Council should review the targets proposed by individual officers for inclusion in the BVPP to ensure they are consistent with the Council's corporate priorities, as specified in the Council's corporate plan.	All targets will be reviewed and specific time has been allocated in the 2003/2004 BVPP Project Plan	Report in BVPP

<p>(e) There is scope to integrate the in-year monitoring of performance indicators more effectively into the reporting of progress on service plans. In some directorates progress on this has been made, but in other directorates separate reports are produced and the issues can be discussed at separate meetings. Corporately the Council should seek to integrate these processes more effectively.</p>	<p>A formal audit of business planning arrangements will take place during 2003/2004 and this recommendation will be actioned as part of this process.</p>	<p>Report in BVPP</p>
<p>(f) The Council needs to ensure that performance management training is provided to members. Performance management is a commonly used term but different people will have different opinions as to what it actually involves in practice. The Council must work to address this and provide members with a series of tools and a common skill set to enable them to maximise their contribution. The addition of general performance management training to the member development programme would be a useful contribution to achieving this.</p> <p>The Council needs to develop the role of scrutiny in assessing general performance management information and using this to challenge performance.</p>	<p>These issues will be fully addressed in the improvement planning following (a) CPA (b) Specific Issues Scrutiny Panel examination of performance management in the Council (c) the review of political structures.</p>	<p>Report in BVPP</p>

Commentary

- (a) Arrangements are in place to derive BVPI's 117 and 174 appropriately
- (b) No estimated data has been used for the 2003/2004 Best Value Performance Plan
- (c) As (b) above
- (d) Improved internal auditing of target setting methodology has been put in place.
- (e) Formal review of business planning across the Council commenced in June 2003
- (f) Revised constitutional arrangements to be proposed to Council in June 2003 with a view to adoption in September 2003. Scrutiny Manager has been appointed and both training and the role of scrutiny now under active consideration.

(3) Social Services: Performance Assessment Framework

The White Paper, "Modernising Social Services" set out new arrangements to assess the performance of each council with Social Services responsibilities within the wider Best Value framework. Performance assessment collates evidence from a wide range of sources, which lead to a comprehensive judgment about how well social care services are being provided or commissioned by the council. This judgment is reflected in a star rating that is used to score this core service area for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the whole council.

In order to show how Social Services has improved in key areas, a chronological perspective is helpful:

Social Services Inspectorate – Inspection of Children’s Services

In 2000, the Social Services Inspectorate undertook an inspection of Children’s Services in Worcestershire. The headline findings were:

- a. Within the children and families service there were many areas of good practice. The council had made good use of the Quality Protects initiative. Operational policies and procedures, training and internal communication were good, and information to the public and management information were set to improve. The after care service, the family centre and the children’s home visited were all strong components of the overall service;
- b. Within this generally positive picture there was a need to continue to develop a more inclusive service, to improve the quality of planning for permanence for children, to react more quickly when cases on the protection register are unallocated and to plan long term to ensure workforce availability;
- c. The service needed to reshape over a period of time from one with high rates of children looked after towards one characterised by inter-agency family support services, provided consistently across the county.

Social Services Inspectorate - Annual Review Meeting 2001

Children’s Services: key concerns related to the education of children looked after and the provision of a robust aftercare service.

Adult Services: key concerns were the need to develop preventative and intermediate care services, develop services to support people in their own homes and deal with quality and performance issues in relation to care plans and reviews.

Social Services Inspectorate - Annual Review Meeting 2002

Children’s Services: remaining concern about the aftercare service due to delays in finalising the contract with National Children’s Homes. This was subsequently resolved satisfactorily.

Adult Services: Intermediate care strategy required more development but noticeable improvements in the delivery times for equipment. The Best Value Review in relation to home care had identified a range of improvement areas that now needed action.

Following the Annual Review Meeting, Worcestershire was awarded 1 star for the way in which the council delivered social care services. The star rating ranged from 0 stars for poor councils through to 3 stars for excellent councils. The review also led to a judgment on Worcestershire’s prospects for improvement and for both Children’s and Adult Services Worcestershire was rated as “serving some people well with promising prospects for improvement”. Worcestershire’s 1 star rating automatically meant that this core area would

be given 2 out of 4 in the subsequent Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the council.

Social Services Inspectorate and Audit Commission.

During 2002 a Joint Review of Worcestershire's Social Services took place and the findings were reported to the Council in April 2003.

Overall View

- a. Strong leadership and sense of direction that is shifting the culture;
- b. Social services is getting organised to deliver positive results for people;
- c. The Council and Directorate is open to challenge and learning;
- d. There is confident and competent management of the workforce, money and partnerships;
- e. Some major service shifts still need to be seen through.

Key Strengths

- a. Corporate and elected member commitment to improvement;
- b. Extremely committed and hardworking staff at all levels;
- c. Purposeful joint working;
- d. Strong emphasis on national and local priorities;
- e. Promotion of race equality.

Key Issues

- a. Solid commissioning and purchasing strategies are key to improved targeting of resources and outcomes;
- b. Shift services to better support independence ;
- c. Invest more in family and carer support;
- d. Ensure consistency and equity within and across service provision;
- e. Potential of partnership working can be further enhanced;
- f. Cascade a culture of best value to all parts of the organisation.

The conclusions of the Joint Review were that Worcestershire Social Services served some people well with excellent prospects for improvement. The full action plan supporting further improvements in Social Services following from the Joint Review is contained in "Planning for Improvement 2003/2006"¹

(4) Educational Services

The Education Service within the County Council is inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Ofsted carry out a cycle of LEA inspections as well as other thematic reviews/inspections of specific provision across groups of authorities.

The Ofsted/Audit Commission inspection of Local Education Authority Inspection took place in the autumn term 1999. Detailed evidence was gathered from all parts of the Education Service and submitted to the inspection team. One hundred Worcestershire schools were asked to complete a detailed questionnaire about the quality of the Local Education Authority's services and support for schools. Following an analysis of the evidence gathered, the OFSTED Team formed hypotheses about the Local Education Authority's

¹ Planning for Improvement 2003/2006. Social Services Directorate. April 2003.

performance. It proceeded to test out these hypotheses in discussions with Directorate staff, other partners in the Education Service, visits to Worcestershire schools, discussions with the two diocesan authorities with our service partners.

The final report published on 13 February 2000 was extremely positive. It described a well run Local Education Authority offering good or excellent services at low cost and enjoying the trust and confidence of its schools and its service partners.

The Inspection Report is thirty four pages long with additional appendices of factual detail. Part of this report provides recommendations to the Local Education Authority to address areas for improvement to further enhance its general all-round strengths and to consolidate its effectiveness.

The then Minister of State for Education wrote to the Leader of the Council stating that

"It is clear that Worcestershire is a well run Local Education Authority ... I am also pleased that the Local Education Authority provides such good quality services at low cost and is so well regarded by its schools"

The inspection report also identified recommendations for further improvement that were organised around a series of priorities:

- a. Education development plan targets and success criteria should be more measurable;
- b. Support for school improvement should be more focused to those schools in most need;
- c. Strategic planning should be consistent with the Corporate planning cycle;
- d. Delegated funding arrangements to schools in relation to traded services should be reviewed;
- e. Standardise administrative IT systems in schools;
- f. Improve the support for the teaching of pupils with SEN;
- g. Progress the work towards rationalising the age of transfer between schools;
- h. Support work to raise the achievement of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds; and
- i. Improve support for the behaviour of pupils

In response to these recommendations we drew up a post Ofsted Action Plan. This detailed the actions to be taken in relation to each recommendation from the inspection report. This plan was published in autumn 2000. In July 2001 a comprehensive exercise was undertaken to record the progress made against the plan. This demonstrated how the recommendations had been incorporated into the service plans of the individual divisions within the Directorate, reported on progress and identified supporting evidence.

This exercise will be carried out again over the summer 2003 as part of the Directorate's preparation for its next Ofsted inspection.

Our actions in response to the inspection's recommendations have been:

- a. To base the target setting process within the Education Development Plan on a comprehensive audit of LEA and school performance data;
- b. To differentiate support for school improvement according to need;
- c. To reflect the Corporate planning cycle in the Directorate's strategic planning processes;
- d. To review delegated funding for services through Head teacher representative groups;

- e. To upgrade administration ICT systems in schools to a basic specification using targeted grant funding;
- f. To review support provided to pupils with Special Educational Needs through a Best Value Review of the Educational Psychology Service and a reorganisation of the Special Educational Needs support services;
- g. To identify consistent age of transfer options as part of all reviews of school provision in individual areas;
- h. To provide additional funding to support the achievement of Ethnic Minority pupils; and
- i. To review and revise the Behaviour Support Plan in order to deliver focussed support to schools.

(5) Environmental Services – Highways Maintenance

The highways maintenance service was inspected as part of the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment of Worcestershire County Council (2002). The service was judged to be a fair service with excellent prospects for improvement.

Key strengths identified by the inspection included:

- a. Clear and challenging aims;
- b. The condition of the road network was known and work was prioritized according to need;
- c. Very effective Highway Partnership Units (HPU's);
- d. There was evidence that improvement is underway.

Areas of challenge included:

- a. Public dissatisfaction with the condition of the highways network. The inspectors found that this was slowly changing as improvements to the network became more apparent to the public;
- b. Condition of non-principal roads was below average;
- c. Unclassified roads were deteriorating;
- d. Customer contact systems were variable across Highway Partnership Units.

The recommendations following inspection were to deliver:

- a. A more holistic approach to the identification and treatment of defects;
- b. A better response to those contacting the service;
- c. Improved road and footway condition;
- d. HPU performance plans to include output targets;
- e. Review the systems of monitoring public inquiries;
- f. Introduce ongoing public consultation arrangements across the county.

In response to these recommendations we have developed and implemented a comprehensive performance improvement plan which is integrated into the Directorate Performance Plan (2003-04) and into all Highway Partnership's Unit Performance Plans. The Plan identifies specific actions to address the issues raised by the inspectors and identifies the timescales for completion and the managers responsible for specific targets. Delivery of the Improvement Plan is monitored quarterly by the Environmental Service's Directorate Management Team.

Some specific responses to the inspector's recommendations were:

- a. Shifting the balance from reactive to planned maintenance by setting targets for and monitoring the balance between planned and reactive maintenance in each Partnership Unit;
- b. Improving the consistency of customer fault reporting and feedback systems by the use of EXOR Public Inquiry Manager computer system in all Partnership Units;
- c. Improving the condition of B and C class roads and unclassified roads by Identifying deterioration and completing the improvement programme for B and C roads and delivering the LPSA Target 5 for unclassified roads. Supporting these programmes by reducing the number of minor carriageway defects through the operation of new inspection regimes in all Partnership Units;
- d. Developing and enhancing business planning throughout the Highway Maintenance Service by including more Unit specific detailed targets in Unit Performance Plans;
- e. Improving the quality and quantity of information provided to the public at/about roadwork sites through the development of systems to feed back public communications and improve the management of the network;
- f. Improving 'customer' feedback to aid future service planning and delivery by undertaking a comprehensive customer survey – 'Worcestershire Highway Maintenance 2003' and empowering people to deal with local issues at a local level through the running of regular focus groups for highway maintenance in each Partnership area.