

# Yes, things could only get better

**Paul O'Brien**

**A**s Tony Blair bows out, it is a good time to look back on what the past 10 years has meant for local government, and what his legacy means for the delivery of those everyday services that matter to people in local communities.

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) has been collecting hard data on a wide range of those frontline services since Labour came to power. And a spot of number-crunching gives a picture of what has worked and what hasn't.

APSE, which works with 300 local authorities across the UK, started gathering performance data when Labour replaced the Conservatives' Compulsory Competitive Tendering contracting culture with a new Best Value approach that focused on public consultation and performance improvement. Our performance networks service is now the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking model of its kind. This means we can compare its first full set of annual figures for 1998/99 with the latest figures for 2005/06.

The overriding trend revealed by our data is that frontline services have got better. Productivity and perform-

Local government has proved it can deliver real improvements. But the pressure is mounting and frontline services are expected to produce ever more for less

ance have improved. Recycling rates in local authorities have risen dramatically from just 7 per cent to 27 per cent, and 93 per cent of households now have kerbside recycling collections. More than 85 per cent of streets are cleaned to a satisfactory Best Value performance level. The number of damaged roads repaired on time has risen from 75 per cent to 95 per cent.

More housing repairs are now carried out by appointment and 89 per cent of these happen on time, while 98 per cent of street lights are now repaired within specified response times. School meals have got more popular and healthier.

The Audit Commission's compre-



ment and customer focus. The emphasis on community empowerment includes streamlined inspections, fewer performance indicators and a focus on outcome-based local area agreements which reflect an appreciation of local government's maturity to set priorities alongside partners.

But the pressure is mounting. Costs have gone up against the backdrop of the welcome introduction of the minimum wage, the demands of an ageing population, an increasing emphasis on environmental issues and mounting legal duties and public expectations. Coupled with a tight Comprehensive Spending Review round, this means frontline services are expected to produce ever more for less.

What about the future for local government under Gordon Brown? New guidance on Best Value is expected over the summer and this must not herald a return to a more market-orientated, cost-focused regime judged merely on price. Councils have proved they can deliver plenty of bang for their buck. We hope Blair's successor creates the milieu in which services can continue to get better.

**Paul O'Brien is chief executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence**

## Contents

### NEWS

Milburn urges a cap on Whitehall growth and payment by results for senior civil servants...page 5

Doubts raised over whether the DCLG's asset transfer fund is up to the task...page 5

### FEATURES

Building on common ground – the property industry will work with the government to achieve sustainable urban regeneration, says Liz Peace...page 23

Councils' leadership role can help ensure the smoking ban contributes to health and wellbeing...page 27

The switchover to digital TV also offers an opportunity to boost social inclusion...page 31

Don't rely on the trickle-down effect – diversity training should embrace the whole organisation...page 39

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