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## PluggedIN

As the great and the good in the film world met to hand out the Academy Awards at the 79th Oscars ceremony in Hollywood's Kodak Theatre last week, the stars of local government were still relling in the after-glow of the latest Comprehensive Performance Assessment Results (CPA).

The real story behind the 2006 results is the collective success of local government, as opposed to individual authorities doing well, with four-fifths of councils achieving a three or four-star rating, a 9% improvement on 2005 and, for the first time in CPA history, no-one in the bottom category.

This adds further credence to what many local authority supporters have believed for some time – that the sector is high performing, continuously improving, and is the area of public services which demonstrates the greatest degree of value for money.

The independent Audit Commission states that 77% of councils are improving strongly or improving well.

Instead of famous actors and actresses such as Forest Whitaker and Helen Mirren celebrating reaching the top of their chosen profession, it is council leaders and chief executives who are rejoicing.

I dare say, there will be a few thank you speeches made in town halls across the country but, hopefully, these will not turn out to be in weeping actress Gwyneth Paltrow-style, since local government is more comfortable discussing a different type of tiers. Most members of the public only remember the few high-profile category winners in the Oscars, and usually, the many technical areas go unnoticed.

One of this year's big success stories is in environmental services, where 84% of authorities are now in the top two categories, as opposed to 52% in 2005. The main political parties recognise the neighbourhood and quality of life agenda as a key voter issue and once again, it is those on the front-line of public services who have delivered the 'bang for the buck' with regard to government investment.

So, now the parties have finished and the glad rags have been put away, it's back to business. If local government wants to repeat its success, then it has a lot of work to do to meet the challenges posed by the White Paper.

Particular issues I am interested in are, how local government can enhance service-users' experience by more individually-tailored choice with scarce resources, improved citizen engagement at the point of use, maintaining competitiveness, and community ownership within a facilitated framework.

If we can answer some of these tricky questions, then the latest set of results may not turn out to be a false dawn, and just as Hollywood applauded movie director Martin Scorsese with his work, *The Departed*, we can celebrate local governments' arrival. ■

# Grass routes t

Does the Local Government Bill offer genuine potential for local community engagement?

The Local Government White Paper stressed the need for councillors to have closer connections to communities and recognised the vital role of local community groups in involving residents in decision-making.

Activists welcome the sentiment, but reserve judgment as to whether it will be translated into action.

They view lack of detail on community engagement in the subsequent Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill and lack of funding for grassroots bodies as obstacles. Leaders of small voluntary organisations that are already under pressure fear they could, in fact, be expected to put in more time and effort with less resources at their disposal.

Research by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) on Linking Elected Members and the Local Community More Effectively Through the Local Government White Paper highlighted the highly variable nature of relationships between individual councillors and community organisations across the country. While links are strong in some areas, one community group representative said there are tensions when councillors feel threatened by strong community leaders.

Another said: 'There can be a tendency by some community groups to perceive the council as the root of the problem, not the solution.'

A common theme expressed by interviewees in the CLES research was uncertainty as to where funds were coming from to build capacity to take on the enhanced role promised them.

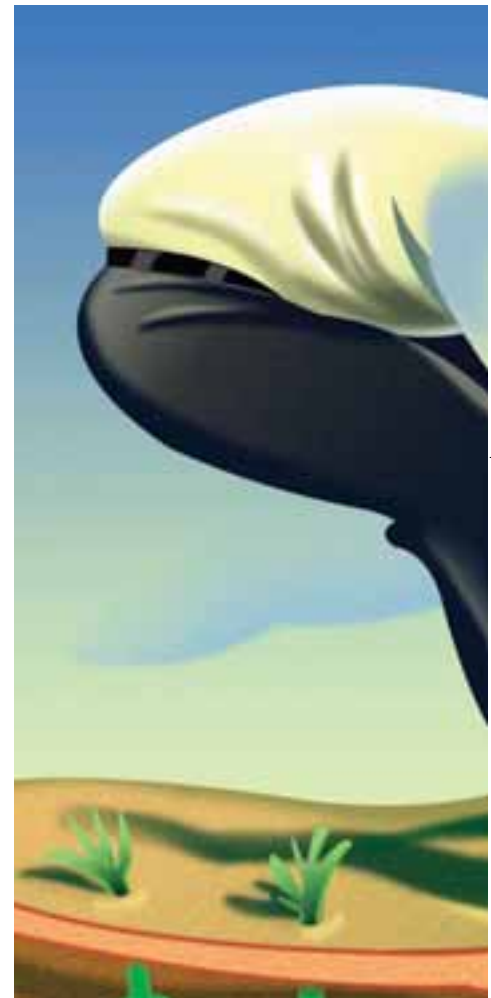
One community group chair pointed out that his organisation struggles to find funding, 'yet the local authority relies upon us at times when they need to consult with the community.' Another said: 'This is raising expectations of what community groups can achieve, but it has to be matched with a strategy for community support and resources.'

The forthcoming Third Sector Review and CSR 2007 will provide a clearer picture. But the end of Single Regeneration Budget, much European Union funding and Community Chest grants coupled with a push towards economic outputs by Regional Development Agencies, mean community groups' funds are dwindling in many places.

A study of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) published last month by umbrella body Urban Forum also shows that 79% of these networks, which were set up to boost grassroots participation, have lost resources since cash was re-directed through Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in 2005. Their ability to allocate small grants for neighbourhood activity has decreased significantly, leaving them unable to do outreach work in deprived areas. The positive news from the survey was, however, that 44% of CENs said that relationships with local authorities had improved since LAAs were introduced.

Elin Gudnadottir, deputy chief executive of Urban Forum, told The MJ: 'The Bill has a lot of talk about community engagement, but [the Government] stops short of saying how they are going to do it. There is a gap between what is being said and what is actually happening. It won't be proper community engagement unless it is properly funded.'

Mandy Wilson, director of community development body COGS, points out that it is not just financial resources that are needed for community activity; it is



Sometimes 'a little bit of force' is too much

access to skills, brokerage, mentors and facilitators. She says: 'There is a lot of talk about community engagement but it has been underpinned by community development and that's not there.'

Last year's Community Development Challenge report, commissioned by DCLG, found that community involvement depends fundamentally on community development and such work has a very low profile, unstable funding and is overlooked by policy-makers. She says it is disappointing that these findings were not reflected in the Bill.

Ms Wilson thinks the Bill places places too much emphasis