



Boosting members skills the Preston way

Most councillors are only too aware of the flak they take when budgets have to be cut or services fall short of residents' expectations. But the sheer volume and complexity of information used to manage services can make it difficult to judge exactly what is being achieved for the money being spent.

A partnership between the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) and Preston City Council has aimed to address this by boosting members' skills and enabling them to carry out an authority-wide value for money assessment.

The project with APSE's best value consultancy was particularly valuable because new councillors came on board in Preston following the May 2007 elections. Councillors received training to equip them with skills to review all services, ask the right questions and gather the best evidence on which to base decisions. As well as developing a methodology to score services and examine tangible measures – including resident satisfaction, spending per head and considering outputs and outcomes against inputs – members gained insight into concepts such as benchmarking, process mapping and contestability.

The partnership approach meant it wasn't just a case of APSE going in and imposing a template, but of spending 14 months collaborating to build corporate capacity and embed value for money measurement into the authority's day-to-day activities. APSE and the council worked closely together to create a model that allowed councillors to have a 'helicopter view' of services and make critical judgments without getting bogged down in excessive detail.

Councillor Eric Fazackerley, deputy leader and executive member for resources, said: 'It's been a really useful exercise. We've identified some areas for improvement – such as we need be more business focused, use benchmarking

data more effectively and also develop process mapping to make services more efficient.

'We have, though, also identified a lot of strengths and this gives us an advantage in being able to evidence and demonstrate value for money. As councillors, we now know a lot more about what the council does and it has given us a platform and the necessary skills to carry out follow up reviews.'

The project was successful because, as an external partner, APSE was able to bring an objective perspective to a challenging process. The partnership meant Preston's score in the Use of Resources element of Audit Commission assessment has increased. Most importantly, the quality of elected members' work has been enhanced dramatically.

Feedback has enabled the process itself to evolve as it has gone along. APSE and councillors and officers at Preston worked together to produce a 'Value for Money Toolkit for Elected Members'. This includes devices such as a scoring sheet, contestability chart and a checklist of key questions.

Other authorities can learn from Preston's experience. The toolkit is a practical way for councillors across the country to be confident that they are in touch with what's happening – and have fewer nasty surprises to deal with.

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