



## Getting real value, not fool's Gold!

There is a famous Oscar Wilde quote about some people knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. My fear is that, in the current economic climate, councils may take decisions about commissioning services based on the former that could spell folly in the long-term for their local communities.

Despite the fact that the last few weeks have brought a press onslaught on public services, local residents are generally well aware that, when it comes to housing, regeneration, the environment and local economy, local government is the bulwark that will see communities through the tough times. This is why I believe that it is important for elected members to be fully in charge of the commissioning process and that they make decisions with full knowledge of current performance of existing services.

Since the earliest days of Best Value, performance management and the analysis of performance information have been crucial to the drive for improvement. Now is not the time to abandon that drive for improvement on the basis of seductive promises about what can be garnered from the market. Whilst the private sector has and will continue to provide services successfully within local government, in many instances it has also failed to live up to the expectations created by the glossy sales pitch.

For me the commissioning process should be about examining local communities current and future needs. Once this has been fully assessed, elected members should then look at all of the information available to them on existing provision, plot the gaps and only then decide whether a procurement process is necessary to fill these. Too many with vested interests seek to misrepresent commissioning in an attempt to bypass a logical procedure and turn it into the 'third coming' of the market. Elected members need to bring their democratic accountability to bear on the process in order to keep it transparent and to ensure it is focused on continuous improvement – not purely market-based solutions peddled by consultants.

As well as performance and customer satisfaction, local economic issues such as employment, training and local supply chains need to be considered to ensure the long-term sustainability of any commissioning decisions. It is only when all of these factors are taken into account that a proper judgment can be made on the true value that local services bring to communities and to local people.

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