

# MALVERN HILLS DISTRICT COUNCIL

## BEST VALUE EXPLAINED

### 1. Introduction

Talk to anyone who works in, or is associated with, local government and the term “best value” will soon enter the discussion. Why? Well - there are many reasons. It is a major part of the government’s plans to “modernise” local government and it has come to be feared by many in local government because it represents change.

But the reality is that Best Value is a way of improving the lives of local people, by changing the way we provide our services in both big and small ways.

It’s something councils have to do by law. But more important than that, it’s a whole set of ideas about how we can all do our jobs better.

This leaflet explains all this in more detail, tells you how you will be affected and suggests how you can play your part.

### 2. What is Best Value?

Best Value means providing local people with what they want, when they want it, at a price they are willing to pay. That’s what we expect when we buy things every day, and it’s what the public have a right to expect of us. Other important principles are:

- Councils have to be accountable to local people. They have to listen to and consult the people they are there to serve.
- Councils must regularly publish details of what improvements they have achieved and what targets they have set.
- Councils must look for continuous improvement. Sometimes this will come through many small changes. Sometimes there will be much larger changes when the existing service is fundamentally challenged.
- Councils must be prepared to expose services to fair and open competition wherever practicable.
- Best Value shouldn’t be seen as an extra job, just another new initiative adding to the workload. It is about making improvements and is part of what we should all be doing in our jobs, all the time.
- Best Value will involve change, but we can’t avoid change in today’s fast moving world. And isn’t it better to be in there, making changes happen, being proud of what you do, rather than simply being a passive victim?

### 3. What does Best Value require?

The law now says that every council has to:

- Review priority areas arising from their Comprehensive Performance Assessment (See “**CPA Explained**”) and other considerations e.g. where there is an identified need to improve performance.

These reviews should:

- **Challenge** why, how and by whom a service is being provided,
- **Compare** performance with others, across a range of relevant indicators, taking into account the views of both service users and potential suppliers.
- **Consult** local stakeholders as to their experience and their aspirations for the future.
- **Compete** wherever necessary so as to secure efficient and effective services.

The reviews need not be major bureaucratic exercises. Indeed latest advice from the government recognises that the early years of best value have been too bureaucratic. The scale and focus of reviews should reflect the importance of the service, issues facing it and the opportunities for improvement. They should also produce demanding improvement targets with clear action plans for how they are to be achieved.

- **Publish a Performance Plan** by 30<sup>th</sup> June each year. We call our performance plan “**The Council Plan**”. This sets out in great detail how well the council has done and its plans and targets for the future.

All of this will be thoroughly **audited and inspected**.

If the **Government** thinks the Council hasn't done what it should in terms of Best Value it **can intervene** to instruct it to do better or it can even take over the running of a service. However, it will usually let the council make improvements first, before taking action.

### 4. Best Value in Malvern Hills

You may already be aware of some of the Best Value work that has been done within the Council.

- **A number of best value reviews have been undertaken** and opportunities for improvements have already been identified. Action plans have been developed to implement improvements identified by best value reviews. Key actions are included in Management Plans, together with improvement targets that have been set. This will help to ensure continuous improvement.
- **A series of Best Value factsheets** have been produced setting out how to tackle Best Value. If you want a copy contact the Strategic Support Unit.
- The **Performance Improvement Panel** has been established to enable elected members to monitor progress with reviews. They are supported by the new Head of Best Value and Performance Improvement.
- The Council publishes its annual Best Value Performance Plan known as “**The Council Plan**”

## 5. What does it mean for you?

You may already be involved in some Best Value work. If you are not involved you will be soon – **Best Value involves everyone**. We can all make a difference.

You should try to get involved in a formal best value review. You can also apply the principles of Best Value by asking challenging questions:

- Why does the Council do this? Does it have to be done that way? Could it be done better?
- Who is the 'Customer' of the service (it may be someone inside the Council, or people who benefit from the service but with whom you don't have contact). Do you know what they really want? How do you keep in touch with their changing needs?
- Could you get ideas from other people or organisations as to how to do all or parts of the job better? This could be people in other sections or departments, or in other organisations.
- Can the Council compete with the best? This shouldn't mean just working harder or for less money. The best way to be competitive in the long run is not by working harder, but by working in better ways. That means coming up with better ways of doing things and making best use of leading edge systems, equipment, and technology.

## 6. What does Best Value look like in practice?

Best Value is not just a bureaucratic paper exercise. What really matters is making improvements for local people. Examples from other councils include:

- Setting up a direct phone line for the public to report problems across a range of services. One council did this and also called back 10% of callers, which helped them improve the service even further.
- Looking in detail at how a service is provided. Is each step in the process necessary? Could it be more streamlined? Could different services work more efficiently together? One council reviewed its housing, refuse and street based services and dramatically improved response times. It reduced housing repairs from 18 to 3 days, highways repairs from 4 months to 6 weeks and produced 40 per cent improvement in responses to street lighting faults.
- Working with other bodies, like the health service, to find more efficient and effective ways to work together. These can then be ploughed back into better services for the community.
- Asking people about their needs. In one case this produced the simple idea of bringing trolleys into libraries to help older people carry books around.
- A sports centre providing a crèche to let mums and dads get exercise. The crèche is subsidised by extra spending on aerobics, food and drink.
- Involving the whole team in reviewing a post and courier service producing £90,000 of savings and the Royal Mail's award of 'Smartest Mailroom in Britain'.

Coming up with good ideas can be challenging, but fun! Often, people doing the jobs already have lots of good ideas – the hardest part may be getting others to accept them!

## **7. Opportunities for Change**

Opportunities for change are often associated with concerns about the future. Some people may fear cuts and outsourcing, as a threat to them and their service. That is not what Best Value is about.

We all know that some councils may have to make cuts but that is not a requirement of Best Value. One of the objectives of Best Value is efficiency (as well as quality and meeting community needs better) but that needn't mean spending less. Even if you increase spending on a service, as long as you get more for your money that is more efficient. The Government has said that it is not going to take any efficiency savings away. They can be ploughed back into service delivery.

Councils will have to have an open mind as to who provides services. It will not be good enough to assume that all services should be provided in-house, or that private sector provision is always best. Each case must be looked at on its merits.

The Government is introducing safeguards so that people's livelihoods will not be put at risk and so there is protection of terms and conditions.

## **8. What next?**

Now it's over to you, since Best Value is for everyone. You should:

- Find out what Best Value activity is going on in the Council.
- Ask why things are done as they are, and whether they could be done better.
- Listen to clients and customers.
- Pick up ideas from other places.
- Don't settle for anything you feel is wrong, mediocre or not best for your clients or customers.
- Believe that all things are possible.

## **9. If you want to know more**

If you want to know more about Best Value in Malvern Hills District Council and how you can get involved:

*Talk* to a member of the Strategic Support team 01684 862227,

[Click](mailto:john.williams@malvern hills.gov.uk), John Williams on global address list or: john.williams@malvern hills.gov.uk

*Put pen to paper* and write to John Williams, Head of Best Value and Performance Improvement.