

Changing for the better

As CPA is replaced by the new Comprehensive Area Assessment, **Davy Jones** takes stock of how local government has responded to the challenges of the past decade, and those it will face in the next

The IDeA recently published a series of interviews with council leaders and a mayor on how they had overseen dramatic improvements in the performance of their authorities.

While each story was unique, common themes emerged, including:

- the key role of an external stimulus, often CPA or an inspection, as a 'wake-up call' to force acceptance of the need for change
- strong leadership, often through 'regime change' at the very top, brought a new unity of purpose across the organisation to improve
- the need to change the culture of the whole organisation and to win the 'hearts and minds' of staff as key ambassadors of change
- clarity of vision, tackling tough decisions early on, and robust performance management to keep the organisation on track
- good communications with residents to change the reputation of the council, and working closely with local partners to achieve improvement
- above all, getting closer to residents and service-users in an ongoing dialogue about their needs and preferences, became the driving force of the organisation.

Incremental change

Taken together, the changes made by local councils in the past decade are significant, but largely incremental. CPA played a key role, but now CAA will focus on outcomes in the area as a whole, and the role of all public agencies in achieving them.

But the challenges of the next decade will be much more daunting – climate change, the economic recession, huge demographic changes, rising citizen expectations, combined with historically-low levels of trust in politicians and the democratic process. Taken together, these challenges are immense, and the pace of change

will need to be exponential. A common feature in meeting all these challenges is the critical role that local councils can play as leaders of their local communities.

Local government needs to save the planet

We are in danger of sleepwalking towards potential environmental catastrophe. Yet, few councils have climate change at the top of their agenda.

There are some interesting developments – Sutton's 'One planet' borough, the Isle of Wight's 'Eco-island' project and the growth of 'transition towns' – but all this needs to be transformed into a wholesale reshaping of the behaviour of local communities to become 'low carbon'.

This could be what finally enshrines 'place-shaping' as what local authorities and LSPs do. Local government should be the 'natural' leader of the shift towards sustainable local communities, which in turn, can be a powerful example to government here and abroad.

Local state intervention in the economic crisis

This is the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s – and it is sobering to recall what happened at the end of that decade.

Already, many commentators are predicting swinging cuts in local services at exactly the same time as demographic changes and user expectations place greater demands on them.

And the idea that markets will provide a magic solution is now thoroughly discredited. Local authorities are more likely to be drawn increasingly into intervening into and shaping local markets to restructure their local economies to be low carbon.

Rebuilding trust by extending accountability

Polls suggest politicians are vying with bankers, estate agents and journalists as the least trusted profession.

Local services are seen as remote and unaccountable. Local people feel powerless to affect change while cen-

tral government, quangos and unelected local agencies deliver most services. This is a dangerous combination. There will be increasing demands that all local public services should be made democratically accountable.

Empowering and politicising local citizens

The new duty to inform, consult and involve local people is welcome, and will begin to change the culture of local services towards information and involvement being 'part of the day job'.

But the degree of behaviour change required, and the complexity of the choices to be made over the next period, require the public to become much more politicised and 'clued up' about local issues and their local communities. Central government can't achieve this – local authorities and their partners might, by providing community leadership.

Professor Richard Layard [founder-director of the LSE Centre for Economic Performance, a research centre covering most areas of economic policy] predicted that in 10 years' time, the Audit Commission would be inspecting local happiness, not performance.

CAA is an important step towards looking at local communities holistically, but in the long run, it will be more politicised, knowledgeable and empowered citizens who will act as judge and jury of what happiness is, as well as being the effective regulator of the work and performance of local authorities and their partners. ■

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The Isle of Wight's 'Eco-island' project – on the horizon – is just one of many projects aimed at helping the environment