

PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!

AWICS

Independence.....Integrity.....Value

Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited



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2004**

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'AWICS' provides a full range of ethical management consultancy and training services, principally to those who provide public services such as local authorities, schools, colleges, housing associations, health authorities, voluntary bodies and many more.

Refuse Collection – how to minimise waste & recycle more

Every council in Britain is facing a crisis as the rubbish mountain grows and landfill sites are filled. As the UK Government implements EU directives, some of which have been around for years, council taxpayers are looking into a black hole. As well as targets for the amount to be recycled, the government is determined to drastically reduce the landfill part by 25 per cent of the total in 1995 by 2010. To force councils down this route, the cost of taking rubbish to landfill is set to more than double to £35 a ton. If this fails to cut back the amounts it will start to fine councils.

Eden District Council in Cumbria has taken a bold and controversial initiative to reduce the household waste that it collects by limiting each household to two small bags of rubbish a week. The Government has based all of its calculations on the rubbish mountain growing by 3 per cent a year. The total increase in domestic waste for Cumbria is 5% a year and in Eden there have been rises of 8% in some years. The Council considers that to meet the 1995 targets will be hard enough, but to end up in six years time at 25 per cent below this target will take some doing.

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The other problem facing Eden and other Cumbrian authorities is the fact that the amount of space for landfill is running out at an alarming rate. At a "waste" conference in Eden a couple of weeks ago, an officer from the county claimed that the county would run out of landfill in five years time at the current rate.

Cllr. Bryan Metz, Chairman of Eden Council's Environment committee spells out why there is an urgent need to reduce the amount of rubbish sent to landfill sites:

"Eden council must drastically reduce the amount of rubbish going to landfill. One reason for the huge rise in rubbish each year has been the open policy of picking up anything from the doorstep. The "black bag" scheme has been abused by residents who have simply gone to the nearest supermarket and bought extra rolls of black bags to leave with the official bags.

"The only way to meet the new government targets is to reduce the number of bags per household to two per week with an extra bag for families with more than six members. To make this easier for the bin men, the colour of the bags has been changed to blue, with gold lettering on the side. Extra bags will be available at the town hall in Penrith at 88p each, the cost of taking the extra rubbish to landfill. No other bags, or rubbish not in bags will be picked up.

"While these measures will feel Draconian and "over the top" to some families, the alternative is a massive rise in council tax and, in a short time, nowhere to put the rubbish. Where people fly tip the rubbish, the council will do all it can to find out who the culprits are, and they will end up in court.

"At the same time as the "blue bag" scheme comes in, the green box scheme will also be rolled out to help people recycle more. The council has government targets to meet here, too, with a recycling rate of 24 per cent required by 2005. Again, failure to meet these targets could result in fines, which means another hike in council tax.

"Not all families in Eden will be part of the green box scheme. The council needed £2.4 million to set up the scheme for everyone and the government only gave £1 million. To help those outside the recycling scheme the council has more than 60 "bring sites" and these could be added to if there is the demand."

The introduction of the scheme over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend appears to have had the desired effect of reducing domestic waste collections and increasing the amount of recycling taking place. However, the Council does not offer a doorstep recycling collection service to all residents and has limited recycling facilities available. The result has been increased usage of recycling facilities and civic amenity sites that has over-stretched their capacity. There have also been reports of increased fly-tipping.

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Kingston on Thames Borough Council has taken an alternative approach. The Council believes that the ecological footprint is about two and a half times larger than it should be. By this they mean that the citizens of the borough leave more than twice the waste and pollution behind them than is necessary. The Council aims to reduce this damage not just by the usual recycling routes or a narrow focus on green issues, but by taking a strategic look at council services. For example, they are creating a bus and cycle infrastructure that makes using the car a less attractive option. The goal is to have sustainable waste management for Kingston by 2020. It can be a dirty business according to Rob Dickson, Head of Environment and Sustainability:

"I've just spent two days at a German waste treatment plant. We are about 20-30 years behind them. By next year they will have stopped putting untreated waste into landfill sites. We spend £40 a ton; they spend £110 per ton.

"Kingston is a big shopping centre – there is tension between that level of consumerism and creating sustainable lifestyles. But this is an opportunity to work in an integrated way with a council that is excellent and ambitious in this area. The response is quite piecemeal in many places in the UK. For 12 years I was operating at a UK – wide level. This is more focused on what is happening on the streets."

Back in Eden, Cllr. Metz has some interesting thoughts on waste minimisation:

"One final thought. What are we to do about the mountain of packaging that you get from the supermarket? Why not gather it all up in the plastic bags and return it to the supermarket the following week? There is no doubt that a "private mountain" of rubbish at the supermarket reception area will soon concentrate the company's mind on what to do about packaging."

However, as Cllr. Metz also pointed out:

"Where people fly tip rubbish, the council will do all it can to find out who the culprits are and they will end up in court".

Perhaps environmentally aware householders will have to find other ways to address the waste created by supermarket packaging!

Adrian Waite

A full briefing paper on refuse collection and recycling can be downloaded from the awics website. AWICS provides advice on refuse collection and waste management to authorities, including carrying out Best Value Reviews. The report for Lewisham Borough Council can also be downloaded from the AWICS website at:

www.awics.co.uk/page27.html

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Direct Service Organisations – reorganising for Best Value

The last few years have seen efforts at improving the whole of the construction industry. Direct Service Organisations are uniquely placed to be at the forefront of challenging outdated practice, emphasising quality and attaching importance to fair employment and safe working practices.

The Latham report identified key issues relating to contracts, skills and quality. Although the report did not question the issue of competitive tendering per se, it did raise serious doubts about the wisdom of a regime that tended towards always accepting the lowest price and suggested that a price/quality balance would be more appropriate.

In 1998 The Construction Task Force led by Sir John Egan submitted its report, "Rethinking Construction". The report challenges traditional thinking and in particular casts doubt on the efficacy of the kind of contract driven arrangements prevalent in the industry as a whole.

The five drivers of change identified by Egan closely mirror the principles that inform Best Value:

- Committed leadership
- A focus on the customer
- Integrate the process and the team around the product
- A quality driven agenda
- Commitment to people

Unfortunately many of the proposals outlined above have fallen on deaf ears as far as the construction industry as a whole is concerned. A voluntary approach to reform has left the private sector trailing behind the public in many areas and in particular in relation to the commitment shown to construction workers by their employers.

The movement for Innovation, established by the government to promote reform, reported that "only 1.7% come from ethnic minorities compared to 6% in the total workforce.... word of mouth recruitment practices are tending to exclude black and Asian people". In relation to Health and Safety, the report states that in the year following publication of the Egan report, there was a 20% increase in the number of fatal accidents in the industry. In the same year all other sectors showed a decrease. Current year figures show that fatalities are up significantly on 1999.

Health and Safety Executive figures suggest that construction remains a dangerous business.

Linda Mackay

AWICS has recently assisted local authorities with Best Value Reviews of Works organisations and procurement of building and environmental services.

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Highways – partnerships with private contractors

In March 2004 Redcar and Cleveland Council announced a multi-million pound contract with construction giants McAlpine to run its roads network.

The innovative package with McAlpine Government Services Ltd has the potential to stretch seven years and be worth £50million.

McAlpine Government Services Ltd is the Integrated Highways Services business of McAlpine Infrastructure Services Ltd, specialists in providing highways maintenance and related professional services to both local authorities and the Highways Agency.

The contract, which started on 1st April covers a wide range of maintenance and improvement works and is worth in the order of £7m a year for an initial contract period of three years, extendable to seven.

The Council's existing sixty strong workforce has transferred to McAlpine along with the responsibility for a roads network that covers 94 square miles, including 550 miles of highways.

The Council's Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Development and Infrastructure Councillor Eric Empson said:

"We are delighted to have struck this partnering contract with McAlpine and hope it continues for many years to come. It means that Redcar and Cleveland will, in future, have the benefit of the expertise and experience of a major highways services provider which is internationally recognised and respected. We look forward with confidence to a successful and mutually rewarding partnership between McAlpine and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council."

McAlpine Government Services Ltd Managing Director Alan Garner said:

"Through the award of this important contract, McAlpine will be working with Redcar and Cleveland Council and our new locally based team to improve the highway infrastructure for all local road users. It marks an important milestone in establishing McAlpine as a service partner and provider in the North East and we are very pleased to have secured the opportunity."

Preparations for the deal began in November 2003 with a tendering process to become the Council's preferred bidder and since February this year, detailed discussions have been taking place between a team of Council officers and McAlpine executives to deliver the final contract.

Linda Mackay

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Prudential Borrowing – local authorities start to use new powers

The Local Government Act 2003 will allow councils to fund local improvements by borrowing money without government consent, provided they can afford to take on the debt. 'Public Services News' has followed the introduction of prudential borrowing in previous issues.

With the introduction of the new system in April 2004, authorities are now beginning to use their new powers.

Haringey Borough Council considers that it will be able to identify resources within the Housing Revenue Account to support prudential borrowing to help to achieve the Decent Homes Standard and other local aspirations.

Other authorities are planning to use prudential borrowing to support a number of general fund schemes.

Lancashire County Council plans to spend £14million on the refurbishment of care homes to bring them up to national care standards; sales of surplus homes will in due course offset the costs of prudential borrowing by generating savings, thus helping to ensure that the scheme is affordable. The council also plans to use prudential borrowing to fund site acquisition costs for waste management transfer stations and recycling plants, enabling government supported private finance initiative schemes to proceed more quickly.

Tower Hamlets Borough Council plans to spend £35million on the renewal of a lease for administrative buildings, £10.9million on an administrative buildings strategy, consolidating administration into two principal buildings, with savings being used to fund the prudential borrowing. There is also a scheme for redevelopment of a sports facility with savings on facilities management making the prudential borrowing affordable.

Norwich City Council plans to spend £5million on the reconstruction of St. Andrews multi-storey car park. There are also plans to finance the rebuilding of Rose Lane multi-storey car park and to make major improvements to the historic Norwich market.

A number of authorities are taking advantage of these opportunities, and it is likely that many more will follow as the new system of prudential borrowing becomes established. However, authorities need to find a means of funding prudential borrowing and this means that opportunities may prove to be limited to services where schemes can generate income or achieve savings. In other service areas, in particular housing, authorities may find the scope for prudential borrowing to be more limited as the housing subsidy system constrains their ability to fund investment.

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Registered Social Landlords – improving governance

A new regulatory code entitled 'Competence and Accountability' has been prepared that is in draft form and is out to consultation. It refers to the principles of good governance and core values for members of the National Housing Federation, and addresses a range of issues.

The matters that are addressed in the code of governance are:

- Constitution of the Board
- Board recruitment, renewal and review
- Essential functions of the Board
- Responsibilities of the Chair
- Conduct of the Board's business
- The Chief Executive
- Committees of the Board
- Openness and Transparency
- Accountability
- Equality and Diversity
- Audit
- Conduct and probity

The revised code is seen as necessary because:

- Housing Associations wish to promote and protect their reputations – both the sector as a whole and individual associations
- Clear standards are needed that are common to all
- There is a need to guard against failure
- IN Business has been created and there is a drive to improve performance
- Board improvement is sought

There are links between governance and performance in that it is possible to have good performance without good governance, but this could probably not be sustained, while excellent governance promotes excellent services.

The reasons why the code is being updated now are:

- Possible payment of board members
- Higgs report that looked at the non-executive role, size of boards and renewal
- Smith report that looked at audit committees and issues
- The political environment is vociferous on governance issues. This includes the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Treasury and Housing Corporation. The Treasury is now very interested, especially in efficiency.
- IN business is changing the way that housing associations operate on the ground

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The code cannot stop all failures, build teams or set strategies.

The main changes in the draft code are:

- Arrangements for board member payment (in light of business case, transparency and accountability)
- Fixed term appointments
- A maximum of nine years' continuous service. This has not proved a popular proposal in the sector. The National Housing Federation is seeking renewal of the sector. Individual housing associations can depart from the code, but must make a business case to explain why the code does not suit them.
- Nominations committee.
- Individual board member appraisal and governance action plan
- Matters reserved for the board
- Boards in group structures (the group board will become primarily responsible for the performance of all sub-boards)
- Annual review of terms of reference.

The consequences of these recommendations are expected to be more emphasis on recruitment and development of board members leading to better boards, and greater clarity of the responsibilities of the board and executive.

The main elements of the 'nine year limit' are:

- A 'cap' of nine years' continuous service, which for elected people, will be three terms of three years each.
- Housing associations will be able to start counting the nine years from the inception of the code or take account of existing years of service
- There is a need to adjust the limit for Chairs
- There is a need to balance the need for skill and experience with the needs for independent challenge and board renewal
- Housing associations have a choice of whether to comply with the code or explain non-compliance. The code represents guidance and is not compulsory.

Other voluntary organisations have a fixed term for board members. This includes Oxfam and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations.

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A full briefing paper is available on the website at: www.awics.co.uk/page24.html

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Can the National Trust solve the affordable housing crisis?

The National Trust plans to designate its 5,000 homes as social housing in a bid to tackle the shortage of affordable rural homes. The heritage charity's move would provide the same number of affordable rural homes as the housing corporation's development programme for the next three years. It would be half the number of new homes that the countryside agency estimates is needed every year for the next 10 years. The homes, which range from cottages to small manor houses, would be rented to key workers priced out of the housing market in towns and villages.

The National Trust has also considered offering land on the edge of villages to housing associations for small-scale development. It is on the verge of striking a pilot deal with Cumbria's Impact Housing Association to convert derelict outbuildings into housing. The Trust's land use director, David Riddle, said:

"We are asking ourselves, to what extent should we be contributing to the delivery of affordable housing?"

Most of the charity's properties, which are spread across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, are let privately at the moment. It has just finished consulting members, staff and rural housing organisations on whether to let the homes at affordable rates and take on many of the responsibilities of a registered social landlord. It expects to compile its new letting policy by June but does not intend to register with the Housing Corporation. The scheme would be similar to that of the Crown Estate, which lets 1,300 properties at affordable rents to key workers in London and Windsor. Jenny Harris, policy officer at the National Housing Federation, said:

"There is a rural affordable housing crisis and the National Trust could play a crucial role in alleviating that. It has got 5000 buildings, which could make a powerful impact."

The National Trust has also considered bringing forward small sites on the edge of villages – known as "exception sites" – for the development of affordable housing. Where the land has been left to the Trust in perpetuity, it could be offered to housing associations on a long lease. There are no estimates of how much land could be available for such schemes, but the trust owns 248,000 ha in total.

It is already in talks with Cumbrian landlord Impact about a pilot scheme that could bring derelict buildings back into use. The Trust owns in perpetuity two barns in Keswick in the Lake District National Park but does not have the money to restore them. Impact wants to take over the barns on a 60-year lease, with corporation grant and a percentage of the rent funding the refurbishment.

So, does the National Trust have the solution to the affordable housing crisis?

Linda Mackay

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Voluntary bodies – how to achieve sustainable funding

Voluntary Organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of managing core costs and recovering them from income on projects as part of their efforts to gain sustainable funding. Key questions that are being asked include: What are core costs? How are core costs currently managed and recovered? Are there alternative approaches? And How can voluntary organisations move beyond just adding a fixed percentage to project budgets?

The Treasury review of the voluntary sector has acknowledged that voluntary bodies should recover overheads in their estimates of providing services. The government's strategy unit has reported on legal and regulatory processes and has concluded that organisational overheads should be further analysed and reviewed. As a result funding relationships between the public and voluntary sectors are being re-cast to be more informed, transparent and mature.

Recognition must be given to the different objectives of voluntary bodies and their funders. Funders are seeking value for money, accountability and sustainability, while voluntary organisations must decide whether they are seeking the free provision of services, recovery of full cost, a profit to help to finance other activities, the subsidy of services from elsewhere in the organisation or to make services accessible. Funders are increasingly acknowledging that funding voluntary organisations fully results in them being sustainable and that this is in the best interests of both parties.

Survival strategies of voluntary bodies typically consist of: Cost recovery, where all core costs are charged out to projects; Cost Diversion where there are constant and repeated conversions of core costs onto projects; Cost Donation, where donations are used to cover non-project costs; and Cost Reduction, where core costs are constantly reduced, often to the detriment of the sustainability of the organisation.

Funders may select one of three different approaches to funding voluntary organisations. Project Funding is where funders accept the full allocation of overheads to each project as part of full cost recovery. Development funding is where funders support time-limited funding to build organisational capacity. Strategic funding is where funders support the central costs of a voluntary organisation as a way of supporting that organisation in general.

One approach to managing core costs is known as 'ARAF'. It has four stages:

- Analyse and Count Costs
- Review costs, especially overhead costs
- Allocate costs appropriately
- Fund costs

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It is considered that following the 'ARAF' principles allows the organisation to run effectively and increases external transparency that helps in discussions with funders.

The costing system needs to be based on the recognition that core costs need to be recovered through project funding and that arbitrary percentages have no grounding in reality. A distinction needs to be made between marginal and average costing and voluntary organisations need to move towards using the latter.

Average costing is considered to have advantages over marginal costing because:

- Use of marginal cost can lead to an expanding organisation placing increasing pressure on overheads
- Marginal costing can lead to some costs being ignored, and is detrimental to building strong and sustainable organisations
- Average costing provides a complete picture and leads to all costs being recovered

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy has produced guidance on Accounting for Best Value in Local Authorities that is relevant to voluntary organisations in this context. The principles contained in the guidance include:

- Complete recharging of overheads
- Identification of the correct recipient
- Transparency
- Flexibility
- Reality
- Predictability
- Materiality

To achieve effective management and recovery of core costs it is necessary for a voluntary organisation to address its accounting systems. Improved internal accounting, financial management and business planning may be required. The development of benchmarking of overheads may be helpful. Innovation may be required to drive down overhead costs. Effectiveness and capacity needs to be demonstrated. Sharper ways of measuring effectiveness and organisational change are often needed.

Voluntary organisations make a major contribution to the economy and to the provision of public services. They harness voluntary effort so that public organisations can fund more public services than would be the case if they were directly provided by public bodies. It is therefore important for both the public and the voluntary sector that voluntary organisations seek sustainable funding, and the effective management and recovery of core costs is an important part of this.

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Training Courses

CIPFA Accounting Conference

Adrian Waite will be the breakout speaker for Housing Finance Current Issues at the Local Authority Accounting Conference on 29th & 30th April 2004 at Bournemouth. This conference is organised by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy and is attended by up to 200 senior local government financial managers each year. It addresses the full range of current and forthcoming accounting issues. It is also an important opportunity to consider wider strategic issues that will impact on local government finance. For more information visit the cipfa website at:

www.cipfa.org/events/show.cfm?events_id=1961

Housing Finance Explained

London (5th May 2004).

One again Adrian Waite is running this successful series in partnership with Housing Finance Training Associates. The course is designed to give a good understanding of housing finance to housing managers, Members, tenants and accountants who are new to the Housing Revenue Account.

To download more information click on the link below:

www.hqnetwork.org.uk/documents/HFX%20Brochure.pdf

Other Courses Available

'AWICS' also offers a wide range of training courses in management and financial topics. These include: Local Government Finance, Accounting and Budgeting, Housing Finance, Housing Stock Options, Arms Length Management Organisations and Personal Development, For further information, please contact Adrian Waite on Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk or 017683-52347.

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