

PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!

AWICS

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Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy
Services) Limited



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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.

The Brown Government's agenda - It's now Education, Health and Housing!

On his appointment as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown gave a short speech in Downing Street in which he spoke mainly about his values, but made one reference to public services:

"As I have travelled around the country and as I have listened... I have heard the need for change: Change in our NHS; change in our schools; change with affordable housing."

On his appointment as Leader of the Labour Party a few days before Gordon Brown set out his vision for the nation. This included a number of important references to public services. It appears that the three priorities of Education, Education, and Education have been replaced by the three priorities of Housing, Education, and Health. Gordon Brown said:

"Half a century ago, housing became a national priority and there was a promise of a property owning democracy, but then unfortunately it was just for the few. Now in 2007 housing will be a priority."

"The Housing Minister will attend cabinet and will lead the national debate on the homes we must build. And this time the promise of a property owning democracy must be open to all those wanting to get on the housing ladder for the first time."

Gordon Brown also stated that local authorities would join housing associations and private developers as builders of new social housing. He has previously announced his intention to create more 'eco-towns' and 'eco-villages'.

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On Education, Gordon Brown proposed that every school should be linked to a business, college or university. He described education as the 'Great Liberating Force for our Generation' and said:

"Our national mission is to be world class in education. Step by step we will raise investment in state school pupils – now £5,500 per pupil – to today's levels for private school pupils: £8,000 a year. For every boy and girl the right to education until eighteen, and for every young person the offer of a college or university place or an apprenticeship, or pre-apprenticeship course, as the route to a career."

Gordon Brown declared:

"The National Health Service will be my immediate priority.

"We need to and will do better at ensuring access for patients at the hours that suit them; better at getting basics of food, hygiene and cleanliness right; better at helping people to manage their own health; better at ensuring patients are treated with dignity in the NHS; better at providing the wider range of services now needed by our growing elderly population, and while implementing our essential reforms, better at listening to and valuing our staff.

"I want a new constitutional settlement for Britain... Devolution within a union of nations... Local government strengthened with new powers – local communities empowered to hold those who make the decisions to account; and with community ownership of assets – greater power for more people to control their lives.

"For young people wanting the first step on the housing ladder to their first home, we will meet the challenge of change.

"For families wanting their sons and daughters to get the chance of college or university, for parents wanting affordable child care, for families and pensioners who want an NHS there when they need it, for people wanting a stronger democracy, we will meet the challenge of change."

In his cabinet reshuffle, he has split the Department for Education into two; one for young people and schools and one for higher education and skills. The Housing Minister, Yvette Cooper, while not being a member of cabinet, will attend cabinet meetings. The new cabinet includes the following ministers with responsibility for the main public services:

- Home Secretary – Jacqui Smith
- Communities & Local Government – Hazel Blears – issues include increasing the supply of affordable homes and the financing of local government
- Innovation, Universities & Skills – John Denham – issues include development of vocational training
- Work & Pensions – Peter Hain – issues include housing benefit reform
- Children, Schools & Families – Ed Balls – issues include the raising of the school leaving age
- Transport – Ruth Kelly – issues include road pricing
- Health – Alan Johnson – issues include productivity, morale and training

The emphasis on education and health is unsurprising and the announcements that have been made do little more than confirm existing policies. However, the emphasis on housing does represent a change of direction by government. In the 2004 Comprehensive Spending Review expenditure on housing increased at the same rate as average government expenditure. The 2007 comprehensive spending review, despite earlier predictions, may be more generous.

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More details emerge on Councils leaving the Housing Subsidy system

Earlier editions of 'Public Services News' have described how six local authorities have carried out a pilot study into the implications of local authorities leaving the housing subsidy system and having self-financing housing revenue accounts.

The Government has concluded that the business plans that have been developed during this study demonstrate considerable benefits from self financing. In particular:

- Long-term financial planning that could be carried out with the ending of the uncertainties of the housing subsidy determination.
- Efficiency savings that could be gained principally through the letting of longer-term contracts. This has already been demonstrated by arms length management organisations that have achieved efficiency gains by letting longer term contracts
- Ability for Councils to make additional investment and to attract private finance to match half of it. The additional investment would be for new build and estate re-modelling and would be delivered through joint ventures that would involve local authority land, private developers and mixed tenure developments

The ending of the housing subsidy system and introduction of self financing housing revenue accounts would mean that councils could have the ability to develop new affordable housing within the housing revenue account without the additional units resulting in a loss of housing subsidy as a result of guideline rents exceeding the management, maintenance and major repairs allowances.

However, it is understood that new development could be outside the housing revenue account and would include homes for commercial sale and part-ownership as well as for rent. The development would be undertaken either directly by the Council or through a development company where the arms length management organisation would be the landlord. This would create the interesting situation where an authority would own council housing part of which was managed through the housing revenue account and part of which would be managed through the general fund. Presumably Councils would be able to charge deficits or credit surpluses on their general fund council housing to the general fund and finance them from council tax. However, it is understood that government has no intention of ending the ring fence on the housing revenue account.

Tenants of general fund council housing would be either secure or assured tenants with the 'right to acquire'. This is necessary to comply with the conditions of the National Affordable Housing Programme.

It is understood that ministers are 'enthusiastic' about the conclusions of the study and it is expected that the government will wish to take the proposals further. However, ministers also have reservations. In particular, the Treasury would like an assurance that self financing authorities would not borrow excessively. It is proposed to provide this assurance for the Treasury by using performance indicators and bilateral agreements with individual authorities as a way of demonstrating to the Treasury that Councils would be prudent.

The capital sums that authorities would either pay or receive when they left the housing subsidy system would be based on a twenty year projection of future housing subsidy entitlements or liabilities discounted to current values. The size of the capital sum therefore depends on the assumptions that are made about future eligibility for subsidy and the discount rate that is chosen. The exact methodology is still under discussion.

The business plan modelling suggests that some authorities would not have viable business plans after they withdrew from the housing subsidy system. The authorities concerned believe that this is because the housing subsidy calculation (on which the capital sums are based) contains insufficient resources. It is understood that the government concedes that this may be symptomatic of a problem with funding the housing revenue account subsidy system and has undertaken to consider this as part of the 2007 comprehensive spending review.

However, it is feared that, should there be uncertainty about future changes to the housing subsidy system; some authorities may be reluctant to leave the housing subsidy system on the basis of a capital sum based on existing levels of housing subsidy. They may prefer to wait, hoping for a more advantageous offer in the future! Another problem is that authorities with high levels of supported capital expenditure – principally those with arms length management organisations – appear to be disadvantaged in the model that has been developed. Work is continuing on this.

The 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review will also consider the principle of allowing housing revenue accounts to become self financing. While it has been put back to the autumn, it is understood that an earlier settlement for 'Communities & Local Government' may be expected. However, it is now believed that the earliest that a new system could be implemented would be 2009/10.

Eligibility is still under discussion, but it is understood that it is likely to be confined to high performing authorities. The reason for this is to give the Treasury assurance that new flexibilities would only be given to authorities with a record of prudent management of housing finance and of risk. The definition of 'high performing' has yet to be determined, as has the matter of whether authorities would have to apply to become self financing or whether certain categories of authority would be identified by government.

There are no plans to link the self-financing of the housing revenue account to an ending of capital receipts pooling. Government sees the two matters as separate and will continue to require the pooled receipts to support the affordable housing programme. However, it is understood that the government is considering relaxing the rent restructuring system thus allowing authorities some ability to increase rents to create 'headroom' for prudential borrowing. This would be consistent with representations by housing associations that argue that a more flexible approach to rent setting would enable them to develop at lower grant rates.

The government has come to the view that local authorities have transferred their stock under large and small scale voluntary transfers at a price that was too 'cheap'. Whether they believe that this has arisen from the method of calculating tenanted market value that totally ignores capital values; or whether they believe that assumptions made in the calculation have been too generous to housing associations is unclear. Given the encouragement that government has given to local authorities to transfer their stock in this way since 1988 this conclusion on their part would appear both surprising and late!

Whether any changes will be made to the calculation of transfer values for authorities that have applied for places on the current transfer programme remains to be seen!

However, the ending of the housing subsidy system and the introduction of self-financing housing revenue accounts may help to smooth future stock transfers where there is overhanging debt or a negative valuation. Many authorities that are in this position are in receipt of positive subsidy and would therefore receive a capital sum in compensation for losing their housing subsidy entitlement. The government would receive compensating payments from authorities in negative subsidy so the effect on central government budgets would be neutral. However, the local authority would use the capital sum to repay debt thus reducing the potential cost of a future large scale or programme of small scale transfers. One implication of these proposals may therefore be to reduce the potential cost to central government of supporting high-cost stock transfers – principally in Inner London.

It is understood that the government's objective in this matter is to facilitate new build rather than to facilitate stock transfer. However, the proposals raise the interesting prospect of a system that facilitates stock transfers that create capital receipts that are used to fund the development of general fund council housing!

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Arms Length Management Organisations – Freedoms, Flexibilities and the Future

Some Arms Length Management Organisations are managing significant Decent Homes Programmes; others are completing theirs, while other authorities are awaiting the government's decision on their Arms Length Management bids.

Government has promised 'freedoms and flexibilities' for Arms Length Management Organisations. There have been studies on the implications of leaving the Housing Subsidy system. The Government has pledged to create more affordable homes and Councils with Arms Length Management Organisations can now bid in the National Affordable Housing Programme. The Efficiency Agenda is already underway and looks set to be developed further as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review with Arms Length Management Organisations expected to deliver efficiency gains. Arms Length Management Organisations that have completed decent homes work are down-sizing and diversifying.

As noted above, the new government sees housing in general and the provision of new affordable housing in particular, as an issue that should be given greater importance. It is almost certain that arms length management organisations will see an enhanced role, including a role in building new affordable housing, as a result.

The government has already initiated a review of the future of arms length management organisations in the summer of 2004 that reported in 2006. It set out the government's views on options for the management of council homes in local authorities with arms length management organisations after the Decent Homes programme has been completed. Arms length management organisations currently have a fixed lifespan, limited to the length of the current agreement with their local authority – usually to 2010. When this ends the government sees a range of possible ways forward, including:

- Arms length management organisations carrying on as they are through extending the current agreement;
- Arms length management organisations taking on a greater range of responsibilities on behalf of the council;
- Arms length management organisations using trading powers to offer a range of services to other organisations;
- Mergers or consortia arrangements between arms length management organisations;
- Changing the management arrangements;
- Integrating the arms length management organisation with other local authority work, changing ownership arrangements.

The government also wishes to secure clarity about when and how tenants and other service users should be consulted in respect of future management arrangements of the local authority stock currently managed by arms length management organisations. The government expects any consultation on a significant change to the local authority's management arrangements with the arms length management organisation to be as comprehensive as that undertaken before the setting up of the arms length management organisation. The paper sets out a number of scenarios under which the government would expect to see tenants consulted and a number where it may be considered good practice to consult.

The paper also addresses issues of operational capacity of arms length management organisations which were considered by the review group including:

- Applying for Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs);
- Representing the authority in court on matters relating to tenants and leaseholders;
- Consulting with leaseholders on behalf of the council;
- Power in respect of a number of environmental issues;
- Seeking exemption from requirements of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) regulation.

In December 2005 the results of a project to test the implications of giving greater borrowing powers to arms length management organisations was announced. Five different financial models were piloted in six different local authorities. The conclusion was that the majority of authorities would need the government to write off debt or provide a 'dowry' in a similar way to where there is a stock transfer with a negative value. This would allow Councils to leave the housing subsidy system. In some cases the financial support required would exceed £100million. The extra spending would have to be justified through planned efficiencies arising from Councils and arms length management organisations achieving more control over expenditure.

Since then more work has been undertaken on the option of local authorities moving outside the housing subsidy system. This was reported on in 'Public Services News' in June 2007.

The four options endorsed by the report are:

- The Council would control a self sufficient housing revenue account with enough investment to maintain the decent homes standard in the future
- The Council would control a self-sufficient housing revenue account but there would be enough investment to meet decent homes plus environmental and community works
- The arms length management organisation would manage a self sufficient housing revenue account, with housing revenue account debt becoming arms length management organisation debt secured against its income but within public sector borrowing controls
- The Council would retain ownership of the stock but become a minority shareholder of the arms length management organisation so it could raise private finance

In December 2005 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister approved the first pilot scheme for an arms length management organisation to build new homes. The scheme, developed by 'Hounslow Homes', will provide homes for rent or sale. It is intended that Hounslow Borough Council will provide free land for the scheme. Hounslow Homes will then be able to fund the development by building homes for sale that will cross-subsidise affordable homes for rent. The plan is to build a total of 1,000 homes – 500 for sale and 500 for rent. Construction work started in March 2006. Tenants of the rented homes will have an assured, rather than a secure tenancy and will therefore not have the right to buy.

The government is developing methods for arms length management organisations to participate in building new affordable homes. These include:

- Empowering high performing councils and arms length management organisations to build and own new social housing
- Partnerships between councils, arms length management organisations and councils
- Use of local authority land
- Arms length management organisations to bid for social housing grant to build homes. This would need councils to give 'parent' guarantees.
- Local authority companies to build new social housing
- Local authorities to compliment development by housing associations
- Re-examination of the 'value for money' tests

Hounslow Borough Council is also understood to be lobbying the government for an extension to the Hounslow Homes contract beyond 2010 to allow them to enter into long-term contracts to borrow private finance. Arms Length Management Organisations have been allowed to bid for funding under the National Affordable Housing Programme for the first time in the 2008/11 round. It is clear that arms length management organisations will play a role in the government's affordable housing agenda.

'AWICS' is holding a series of seminars on 'Arms Length Management Organisations – Freedoms, Flexibilities and the Future' during the autumn of 2007. Details are included in his newsletter below.

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How does Dedicated Schools Grant work?

Since its election in 1997 the government has been concerned to increase expenditure on schools and to ensure that local authorities actually spend any resources intended for schools on schools rather than central services in the local education authority or other services. A succession of funding changes culminated in 2006/07 with the introduction of the Dedicated Schools' Grant.

The Department for Education & Skills published a 'Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners' in July 2004. The strategy proposed new school funding arrangements from 2006/07 including:

- A ring-fenced grant from the Department for Education & Skills to local authorities for school funding
- Three-year budgets for schools aligned to the academic year and based on pupil numbers
- A new Single Standards Grant

The Education Act 2005 made further changes to the education finance system as follows:

- Schools are allowed to receive three-year budgets based around the academic year
- The Secretary of State's power under the Education Act 2002 to pay grants to local education authorities was clarified and extended to include a power to make a grant to cover the core funding of schools
- The Secretary of State is allowed to make regulations to give specified decision making powers to schools forums regarding central spend and the minimum funding guarantee

The purpose of these new arrangements is to:

- Give schools more certainty about budgets
- Allow schools to plan ahead, improve financial management and link financial planning to school improvement programmes
- Guarantee delivery of the government's commitment to increase expenditure in schools in each local authority area
- Reduce the bureaucratic burden of the local education authority on schools
- Give schools greater clarity on the use of standards-related resources
- Ensure that resources allocated to education have a greater impact on the standard of education delivered

The government has set schools a 'Schools Financial Management Standard' that secondary schools will have had to meet by March 2007. Primary and special schools have a later deadline to meet the standard. This has been supported by a 'Supporting Schools Financial Management Programme'.

By March 2006 all schools were given budgets for 2006/07 and 2007/08. These two years are the transitional phase of the new system. The settlement includes a minimum increase in per-pupil funding each year that will be set in advance. Budgets will be updated annually to reflect changes in pupil numbers and other variables that will be determined locally but specified in advance in the local formula.

For schools with sixth forms, the Learning & Skills Council has increased its funding rates for 2006/07 and 2007/08 to match the minimum funding guarantee for secondary schools.

From 2006/07 local education authorities have received the 'Dedicated Schools Grant' from the Department for Education & Skills that is a ring-fenced grant designed to fund expenditure on schools. There is a minimum per-pupil increase guaranteed in 2006/07 and 2007/08. There is also a 'cash floor' to protect local education authorities with rapidly declining pupil numbers.

A local education authority must use the Dedicated Schools Grant in its entirety to fund the schools budget. Local education authorities can also add resources to the schools budget from their other resources but they are not required to do so.

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Dedicated Schools Grant is calculated as follows:

- A baseline was established for each authority based on the 2005/06 schools budget
- All authorities receive this baseline plus the same minimum increase per pupil in 2006/07 and 2007/08
- The Secretary of State determines the basis for distributing any additional resources – in practice this funding has tended to go to authorities where schools spent below the 'Formula Funding Share' in 2005/06

From 2008/09 local authorities will receive multi-year allocations of 'Dedicated Schools Grant'. In early 2008 schools will be given budgets for the three years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 in line with the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 cycle. It is possible that budgets will be set in line with the academic year as part of this settlement.

Government is seeking agreement with the teachers' unions on a two- to three-year pay settlement for teachers to allow schools greater certainty in the management of staffing budgets.

With regard to Children's services the Lyons enquiry into the form, functions and finance of local government concluded that:

"Children's services have been an area of dramatic reform in recent years. The Children Act 2004 introduced a significant reorganisation of children's services, bringing services and partners together with the aim of promoting better outcomes for all children and improving the child protection system. By 2008 every council is expected to lead the creation of a Children's Trust, bringing together strategic oversight of all services for children and young people in an area.

"Schools provide a national service directly to the community, and therefore provide a potentially vital link between local communities and the local authority, crucial to any place-shaping agenda which focuses on improving the well-being of families. No other service providers, except perhaps GPs, play such a vital role.

"Schools are excluded from the duty to cooperate which applies to other partners in relation to the Local Area Agreement. They are, however, required to have regard to the Children and Young People's Plan, which informs and is informed by the Sustainable Community Strategy. Nevertheless, I am concerned that this link may be too weak to ensure a high degree of cooperation, and the Government should consider more formal mechanisms to ensure greater collaboration on place-shaping issues."

Education is the largest single revenue budget in local government and also has a significant capital programme. The financing regime for education has been changed significantly recently as government has attempted to ensure that additional resources made available to education are spent at the 'front line' in schools. The introduction of the Dedicated Schools' Grant in 2006/07 has effectively ring-fenced resources to schools ensuring that schools' budgets are protected but also reducing the financial flexibility available to local authorities.

Gordon Brown has identified education as one of his main priorities within the public services and has set an objective of raising levels of funding per pupil in state schools to the level found in fee paying schools. One of the first decisions he announced as part of the creation of his cabinet was the creation of a new Department for Children and Schools.

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Local Area Agreements

The introduction of Local Area Agreements represents a major change to the relationship between central and local government. They are contracts between central and local government that deliver local people's priorities through a dedicated funding stream. They are agreed for a period of three years but are 'refreshed' annually.

It is intended that Local Area Agreements will provide a strong focus for the community leadership role of a local authority in drawing together the work of a range of local public, private and voluntary bodies. The intention is that these bodies work together in a joined-up way thus achieving efficiencies, minimising bureaucracy and maximising delivery. Local Area Agreements commonly address such issues as services for children, crime and anti-social behaviour, public health or economic or social deprivation.

The key aims of local area agreements were set out by government in the Local Area Agreements Prospectus in July 2004. They are to:

- Improve central/local relations
- Improve service delivery
- Improve efficiency
- Improve partnership working
- Enable local authorities to provide better leadership

Local Area Agreements started with twenty pilot schemes in March 2005 and have now been extended across England.

Local Area Agreements can be funded in three ways:

- Area-specific funding allocated and distributed directly to an area by a government department
- Mainstream funding including revenue support grant, police, national health service, primary care trust or schools funding
- Funding to NDPBs including regional development agencies, the lottery, sport England or the learning and skills council

Areas previously in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding had this funding pooled as part of the Local Area Agreement. It is also proposed that funding currently provided through 'Supporting People' will be pooled into Local Area Agreement funding.

Before agreeing a Local Area Agreement, Regional Government Offices have to consider whether the proposal meets the minimum requirements regarding:

- Outcomes
- Indicators and Targets
- Performance Monitoring and Reporting
- Performance Management and Improvement
- Operational Planning and Delivery

The outcomes must be derived from evidence of local circumstances that can be found in existing strategies such as the community strategy or housing strategy. It is necessary to demonstrate that all partners have a high level of commitment to the local area agreement at both political and official levels. There must also be clear agreement on delivery between the partners.

As part of the Local Area Agreement about twelve outcomes are identified as priorities for improvement locally. Indicators and targets are also agreed for the measurement of the achievement of these priorities. 'Performance Reward Grant' is available to the local authority if 'stretched' performance targets are achieved over the life of the Local Area Agreement.

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Scotland's New Policy Agenda

Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond spelled out the strategic priorities for the new Scottish Government in a speech at Holyrood in May 2007. He said the strategy included:

- The appointment of a Council of Economic Advisers to provide independent advice on making the most of opportunities in the global economy
- Scotland to be nuclear free and to take the lead in the 'green energy revolution' and the development of renewable technology
- The abolition of tolls on the Forth and Tay road bridges

Mr Salmond said:

"Scotland's new politics starts now. Let's start as we mean to continue - with respect for diversity of opinion... On behalf of the Government, I intend to lay out what we see as a range of policy initiatives. In doing so, I explicitly recognise that the Parliamentary arithmetic requires those priorities to be a first draft and not a final position... Good ideas, well researched and well-argued will be welcomed and considered. If the challenge for this Government is to share power with Parliament, then the challenge for the Parliament in return is for every party and every member to remain open to persuasion."

Social Housing is clearly an issue that will need to be addressed. Minister for Communities Stewart Maxwell said the challenges were 'immense' and that he was acutely aware of the difficulties many people face achieving their basic housing aspirations.

In the autumn, the Scottish Executive will consult on its proposals for social housing, inviting people throughout Scotland to join the debate and offer their ideas on the best way ahead.

In the meantime a Housing Supply Task Force, chaired by the Minister, has been set up to tackle the obstacles, such as land supply and planning issues that have been hampering the delivery of more housing. The Minister's focus will be robust challenge to the way things are done in order to secure the urgent action needed to improve housing supply in Scotland. The Task Force will work to a clear remit that will drive forward a focused plan of action. The Housing Supply Task Force has a wide membership - drawn from local authorities, house-builders, the housing association movement, and housing interest groups.

It is intended to create a Scottish Housing Support Fund to provide additional help for the many people who struggle to afford a first home of their own. The government have already begun exploring options with the private sector, which is keen to invest more in housing, and regeneration, in Scotland.

In the Holyrood chamber Mr Maxwell said:

"A healthy housing supply forms the bedrock of fairer, stronger and safer communities...The sobering reality is that there are simply not enough new houses being built. There are over 8,500 homeless households in temporary accommodation, plus unacceptably long waiting lists for affordable rented housing across Scotland. This is set against a backdrop of property prices continuing to rise at an alarming rate, worsening the problem."

"One of the burning questions is whether we are getting value for the huge sums of taxpayer's money ploughed into housing provision... The present arrangements for subsidising social housing are unsustainable. If we don't reform these arrangements, satisfying projected demand for social housing in future years will be impossible... It will require an astronomical injection of funding from the public purse."

The Scottish Executive also plans to abolish the Council Tax and replace it with a Local Income Tax.

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Cumbria County Council's procurement policies include social responsibility and working with voluntary bodies

Cumbria County Council believes that 'corporate social responsibility' is about companies and organisations moving beyond legal obligation towards an ethos of integrating socially responsible behaviour into their core values whilst at the same time maximising commercial opportunities. They are leading the way with a variety of initiatives including bespoke procurement policies to work more effectively with voluntary organisations.

The government is promoting 'corporate social responsibility' as a way of achieving environmental protection, community cohesion and sustainable economic growth and business. As part of the initiative, government has sponsored five local authority 'pathfinders' to develop best practice models in working with voluntary organisations to deliver more effective public services. Cumbria County Council is one of the pathfinders along with Dorset County Council, Nottingham City Council, Portsmouth City Council and Tower Hamlets Borough Council.

Cumbria County Council serves a population of half a million people, spread across a large geographical area, many of whom live in remote districts. The performance of the local economy is poor and there are many pockets of severe deprivation. In response to this the County Council has established neighbourhood forums that often cover a very small area and that address matters including housing, policing and post office and retail outlets. The County Council and its neighbourhood forums also engage directly with voluntary bodies – many of which are also quite small – to provide a range of social services from youth activities to meals on wheels or general care for the elderly.

When tendering for services the County Council breaks the contract down into a series of smaller ones so that voluntary bodies are able to tender. For example, the County Council currently provides £300,000 of grant to the Citizens' Advice Bureaux to fund a money advice service. There are seven Citizens' Advice Bureaux in the county and the County Council is encouraging them to provide an outreach service into the smaller settlements and to provide online advice through the County Council's broadband infrastructure. Another example is that the WRVS delivers meals on wheels. In addition to delivering meals, the WRVS offers general advice and information on local services and identifies problems that clients might have. The County Council plans to extend its work into developing and extending community transport initiatives.

Stuart Pate, Head of Community at Cumbria County Council was quoted in the 'Business Gazette' as saying:

"The government is committed to supporting the third sector to deliver more effective public services and we as a local authority have got some excellent schemes in place and effective relationships and partnerships with many groups in the county... Our role is to make the relevant organisations aware of the opportunities that are arising and the changing circumstances in which they work... It may be that some organisations are eager to expand and that we can assist them whilst others may be content to stay as they are."

Cumbria County Council also recognises that procurement and supply chain policies can be positioned to influence the social, environmental and economic performance of the area. For example, the County Council spends £4million a year on food and whenever possible orders from county-based firms, particularly small to medium enterprises of which there are many. One example is the Pie Mill at Threlkeld that has agreed to supply the County Council with pies made from locally sourced beef, chicken and flour. In this way the County Council supports the local economy and ensures a high quality of meals in schools and care homes.

Cumbria County Council is also a member of the 'Fair Trade Network' as a result of which all coffee served at council meetings is 'fair trade'.

Adrian Waite

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Services on offer!

'AWICS' offers a wide range of management consultancy and training courses in management and financial topics. These include:

- Regional Seminars
- In-House Training
- Management Consultancy (including Business and Best Value Reviews, Advice on Procurement, Housing Finance, Housing Stock Options Appraisals, Housing Association finance, Public Authority accounting, Advice to voluntary bodies and Performance Management)
- Independent Tenants' Advice

For further information, please contact Adrian Waite on: Adrian.Waite@awics.co.uk or 017683-52347 or 52165.

'AWICS' announces 2007/08 Programme of Regional Seminars

Our 2007/08 programme of regional seminars has now been arranged as follows:

- Arms Length Management Organisations – Freedoms, Flexibilities and the Future (October to December 2007)
- Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 (November to December 2007)
- Developments in Scottish Housing Finance (November 2007)
- Developments in Welsh Housing Finance (November 2007)
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – February to July 2008)
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – April to July 2008)
- All You Want to Know about Housing Association Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – March to July 2008)

Details will be placed on our website: www.awics.co.uk/services/trainingandlectures.asp

Opportunities with 'AWICS'

'AWICS' are looking for people who would like to become Associate Consultants. The role requires not only appropriate qualifications and significant relevant experience, but also a strong commitment to public services to working with independence, integrity and value.

We are especially interested in appointing Associate consultants with expertise in the following fields:

- Local Government Finance
- Housing Management
- Arms Length Management Organisations
- National Health Service Finance
- Finance of Voluntary Bodies

Applicants should send a copy of their curriculum vitae to Adrian Waite at AWICS Limited, Appleby Business Centre, Bridge Street, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6QH. Or e-mail Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Further details will be made available on our website: at www.awics.co.uk/opportunities.asp.

Note: Any views that are expressed in this newsletter are those of the author of the article and do not necessarily reflect the views of 'AWICS' or of Adrian Waite.

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