

PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!

AWICS

Independence.....Integrity.....Value
Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy
Services) Limited



June 2005

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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.

Election 2005 – Implications for Public Services

The re-election of New Labour is likely to result in a quickening of the pace of reform in public services. Following his re-election, Tony Blair MP, the Prime Minister, said:

“We will focus on delivering not just the investment but the reform and change in those public services... I will do so with passion because I want to keep universal public services but know that the only way of keeping the consent for them is by making the changes necessary for the twenty-first century.”

This includes:

“A proper sense of respect in our schools, in our communities, in our towns and our villages.”

The cabinet re-shuffle saw Charles Clarke continue at the Home Office, Ruth Kelly at Education and Alistair Darling at Transport. David Blunkett is the new Secretary of State for Work & Pensions and Patricia Hewitt is the new Secretary of State for Health.

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A new Communities Department has been created to oversee Local Government and Communities initiatives. It is part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, but is headed by David Miliband who is a Secretary of State with a seat in cabinet. He started his appointment with a trip to Kent to see Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart of the Local Government Association. The Local Government Association has said that the new department 'symbolises a historic opportunity to deliver a lasting return of power and choice to the people.' After the meeting Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart said:

"The public showed it was not hugely impressed with any of the parties. An equal partnership between central and local government that empowers communities and improves public services will help overcome that... It is a good signal that on his second day in office, David Miliband took a morning out to come and talk to us... The Local Government Association has known him from his education role and we are looking forward to working closely with him."

David Miliband MP said:

"Central and local government need to work with each other and not talk at each other. We will not always agree on everything but it is important we understand and listen to each other."

The first action of the new Secretary of State has been to launch a wholesale review of all the government's housing and regeneration programmes. This is described as a:

"Stock take of the office's programmes and activities to ensure that these are the best ways of delivering the outcomes for sustainable communities."

However, Ed Davey MP, Liberal Democrat spokesman on Housing said:

"It is even less clear now who is in charge. Members of Parliament and the public will want to know which minister is ultimately responsible for the department... The lack of clarity we have had so far is not good for efficient and accountable government. It is still incredibly unclear what is going on. One wonders almost if they know themselves."

The Queen's speech on 17th May 2005 included:

- New arrangements for secondary schools – including city academies
- Reform of incapacity benefit
- Tackling anti-social behaviour and disorder
- Introduction of Identity cards
- Expanding capacity and choice in the National Health Service (with increased private sector and voluntary provision)

The 2005 Comprehensive Spending Review should prove interesting. As the scope for increased public borrowing has now been exhausted within the constraints of Gordon Brown's fiscal rules, growth in public spending above the 2.5% a year anticipated growth in the economy would have to be funded from tax increases. Should increases in tax not be made, there would be a need to reduce investment in public services. This would impact on public service budgets, council tax increases and rent increases for 2006/2007.

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Local Government Funding Review

The Local Government Funding Review, being conducted by Sir Michael Lyons, has achieved less prominence in the media during the general election campaign than it did when it was first established. But what has Sir Michael Lyons been up to, when will he report and will he propose any radical changes?

Sir Michael Lyons recently reported to a meeting of the Central-Local Partnership that he was undertaking extensive consultations, had commissioned some additional research and was seeking to learn from the Welsh Council Tax revaluation. He has identified two main challenges:

- The need for the public to be engaged with the underlying issues rather than just the technical ones
- It is important for people to understand a diversity of views rather than just regional ones

Apparently the regional consultations have produced the following messages:

- Support for three year funding streams and a simplified system
- The complexity of the grant distribution system is a barrier to accountability
- Local Government reorganisation is seen as inevitable and should therefore be hastened
- The limited funding allocation leads to difficulties in balancing national and local priorities
- While the national Confederation of British Industry is resistant to change, local business groups are less resistant

Local Government representatives have responded with their own views:

- The review should focus on financial issues rather than local government structures
- Reform of business rates is welcomed
- They favour the 'combination option' and will prepare papers on this
- The government should deal promptly with implementation of the review
- The review timetable should be condensed to dovetail with the revaluation agenda
- It is important to involve police authorities

In the meantime the government has re-stated its housing priorities as being to:

- Ensure all social housing is 'decent' by 2010
- Offer councils arms length management, private finance initiative and stock transfer as routes to secure more investment in local authority housing
- Maintain the 'right to buy'
- Extend 'homebuy', introduce a first time buyer's shared equity initiative, develop key worker living
- Build 1,000 new homes for £60,000
- Build more homes in the Thames Gateway, three other growth areas and rural areas
- Require 60% of new development to be on 'brownfield' land and build at high densities
- Maintain the nine market renewal pathfinders, and invest in tackling low demand outside the pathfinder areas
- Create new 'Safer and Stronger Communities Fund'

However, it is not expected that the local government funding review will lead to any radical changes in the way that local government is financed.

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**Tenant Empowerment in Fenland:
Transfer is the only option that delivers what tenants want say tenants!**

Since May 2004, AWICS has been working as Independent Tenants' Adviser during Fenland District Council's Housing Stock Options Appraisal.

The Working Group created to assess Fenland's future housing options has now reached the view that transfer from the Council to a housing association is by far the best way forward.

The 12-strong tenant-led group believes that switching to a new not-for-profit landlord has many more advantages for council tenants.

The group, which has met regularly during the last year and weekly since January, has assessed and analysed five options, while listening to experts and visiting other areas in an effort to make sure no stone has been left unturned in finding out what is best for the district.

The group compared their research and findings with what tenants had told them during a massive consultation last year which established what is known as the Fenland (housing) Standard.

More than 1,300 tenants said that not only did they want the current level of improvements but also security lighting, over bath showers, secure entrances – and more new affordable homes for rent to be built in the future.

George Hawkins, a tenant who chairs the Options Fenland Working Group said:

"We took all tenants' comments, needs and requests into consideration and looked at how these can be paid for and what option could best achieve the Fenland Standard as well as the government's minimum requirements.

"After much number crunching and evidence we ruled out three options – Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and a mix of options. These options do not stack up financially or deliver what tenants had asked for.

"That left us with two – keeping the homes with the Council (retention) or transferring them to a Housing Association - and what became clear is that transfer met tenants priorities best."

The Working Group believes that transfer will give tenants much more than the other options because it will mean more money for repairs, improvements and new homes.

Transfer can meet the standard created by Fenland tenants, while retention can only meet the Government minimum standard.

George Hawkins added:

"While retention can work it will be difficult – it will definitely mean that less money is available for improvements. It will definitely mean that less affordable housing can be built in the future.

"But it must be stressed that this is only our viewpoint, no recommendation nor any decision has been made and nor will it be so until tenants tell us exactly what they think.

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“From the outset this has been a tenant-led process and it will remain so until the end. That is why we are testing our view during May in a series of events throughout Fenland. It is vital now that tenants come out in numbers to give us their feedback, because this is a hugely important step we are all taking and we must get it right.”

Following this consultation phase all opinion will be pooled and collated by ‘AWICS’ as the Independent Tenant Advisor and fed back to the Working Group who will then make a recommendation to Council.

If transfer is the option chosen all tenants would take part in a ballot and if a majority voted for transfer it would take place, if a majority voted against it, it would not.

The Options Fenland Working Group has been criss-crossing the district during May to allow every Council tenant to have their say on the future of housing in Fenland. Options Fenland on tour has visited 35 venues in addition to using the mobile library to reach tenants in the more rural areas.

The events, which stretched from Monday 9th May until Monday 28th May also included fun days at the George Campbell, Hudson and Manor Leisure centres where there were bouncy castles and face painting for children.

George Hawkins, tenant-chair of the Options Fenland Working Group, said:

“After nearly a year of consultation and deliberation we are coming to the crunch time of the Options Fenland process.

“Tenants have told us clearly what improvements they would like to see to their homes and in their neighbourhoods and we have measured the original five options against this and are now left with only two that can possibly deliver – retention and stock transfer.

“Our view is that transfer best meets our tenants’ aspirations, but we must make sure that everyone has a chance to comment on what we have found out.

“We will not be recommending an option to the Council until tenants have done just this and that is why during the last two weeks in May we are trying to meet as many people as possible to get their opinion on our view of the future of housing in Fenland.”

A newsletter accompanying this ‘Pool of Opinion’ phase has also been sent to every Council tenant in Fenland explaining comprehensively the Options Fenland Process and how they can still influence it.

The newsletter also contains a full list of all the Pool of Opinion events while posters went up all over Fenland with the full tour details.

During this period the Fenland @ your service one stop shops were also open from 8-6pm with staff on hand to answer queries and offer advice.

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More information can be found on the Independent Tenants’ Adviser website:

www.awics.co.uk/fenlandita.asp

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AWICS designs software for managing tenant consultation

Over the last month AWICS has been involved in the process of providing an independent facility for tenants within the Fenland area to voice their views on the option of transferring council houses to a housing association. This collection of tenants' and leaseholders' opinions and also the analysis of the data collected has been carried out independently by AWICS. The results of the consultation will be reported to the tenant-led Working Group who will be using the information of the survey to decide the future of the housing stock currently owned by the Council.

AWICS has been working in association with the tenant-led Working Group for the last year and has been providing tenants with independent advice on what different housing options would mean for them through newsletters, meetings and a free phone service. During May we have been carrying out a consultation of the tenants through the use of questionnaires.

Questionnaires were sent to every tenant and leaseholder. The questionnaires were accompanied by a newsletter informing the tenants of the options that had been considered along with the expressed preference of the working group. This was done to ensure that tenants would be fully informed before making their views known. Also tenants were invited to call the tenants independent helpline if they had any queries to what the different options would mean to them. The questionnaire also allowed tenants to give reasons for their preferences.

For AWICS to review the data collected and provide an independent overview of the results we developed an analysis system which allowed for all the results collected to be added to the system and then for the results to be collated as was required for the analysis. With the Fenland housing options appraisal this has included overall analysis of the consultation feedback for all the returned results including the number for and against the proposal and the reasons given for this choice. There is also a breakdown by geographical area, and between general needs tenants, tenants of sheltered housing schemes and leaseholders. This enables us to identify whether different groups of tenants have different views or different reasons for arriving at those views.

This data has been represented in raw figures for each choice along with percentages so that the results can be compared by the different areas and tenant types alongside supplying the output of the data within graphs which clearly help to show all the results from the data collected.

The consultation will come to an end on 31st May 2005, and a meeting of the working party has been convened for 16th June 2005 at which a presentation of the results will be made. The computer system that has been developed ensures that we will be able to report promptly and provide comprehensive analysis of the results of the consultation. The next edition of 'Public Services News' will carry the result of the consultation exercise.

The software that we have developed for the Fenland consultation is only one example of how information technology can be used to streamline a consultation process giving a more thorough analysis of the results than would be possible using a manual system or a system based on traditional spreadsheets.

Richard Myers

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All You Ever Wanted to know about Local Authority Housing Finance

Do you think that a working knowledge of local authority housing finance would put you and your colleagues in a position of advantage?

Whether you are a Housing Manager, Councillor, Tenant Representative or even a member of the Housing Finance Team, you could benefit from one of our courses at which you will learn:

“All You Ever Wanted to know about Local Authority Housing Finance”

Adrian Waite is well known for his in-depth knowledge of this subject and his ability to present information clearly.

The course covers the Housing Revenue Account, Resource Accounting, Rent Restructuring, Service Charges, Housing Subsidy, Capital Programmes, Housing Investment Programme, Decent Homes Standard, Housing Revenue Account Business plans, Comprehensive Spending Review and Efficiency, Strategic Housing responsibilities, Best Value, Private Sector Housing and Homelessness, Supporting People, Housing Benefit, Regeneration, Registered Social Landlords, Options Appraisals, Arms Length Management, Private Finance Initiative, Stock Transfer and many other aspects of local authority housing finance. However, it can be tailored to the requirements of an individual client.

It is accompanied by a useful booklet entitled:

“All You Ever Wanted to know about Local Authority Housing Finance”

Many local authorities – their staff, elected members and tenants have already benefited from this course.

This course is available NOW as an in-house course. The price is competitive.

For further information please contact Adrian Waite on 017683-52347. or **Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk**

The SORP Requirements for Group Accounts

Adrian Waite will speak at the CIPFA Local Authority Accounting conferences on the SORP 2005 and Best Value Accounting Code of Practice that will be held on 28th June, 2005 & 13th July, 2005 at the Radisson SAS Portman Hotel, London & York Moat House, York.

Adrian's focus will be on:

- implementing the new group accounts requirements
- lessons from early 2004 / 2005

For more information follow these links:

London - <http://secure.cipfa.org.uk/cgi-bin/CIPFA.storefront/EN/product/US19>

York – <http://secure.cipfa.org.uk/cgi-bin/CIPFA.storefront/EN/product/US20>

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The Fourth Option and Tower Hamlets

The 'Fourth Option' now has a new champion in parliament. George Galloway, the new 'Respect' MP for Bethnal Green & Bow is best known for his views on the invasion of Iraq. However, he has stated that his main priority is social housing. He said:

"It is the first item on my agenda... I will seek to construct a cross party group of MPs to fight for a shift in resources... I do not accept the counsel of despair which is stock transfer. We need resources for local authorities to build and maintain houses and we need democratic mechanisms, involving tenants genuinely, not the handing over of our housing to other landlords... I am encouraged in the composition of the new parliament that real pressure can be put on the government."

It is understood that George Galloway has signed a petition opposing the stock transfer programme of Tower Hamlets Borough Council. This builds on 'Respect's' established position on stock transfer. Glyn Robbins, Chair of the local branch of 'Respect' said:

"We support Defend Council Housing and we completely support their demands for the fourth option... I think local people here feel betrayed by New Labour, by the loss of their council housing through stock transfer. Oona King (the former Labour MP) has followed the New Labour line... Housing is the number one issue here."

It is not surprising that the future of social housing is an issue in Bethnal Green & Bow. 82% of people in the constituency live in flats and the deprivation indices are high. It has a long tradition of providing homes to migrants. Many of these homes fall below the 'Decent Homes Standard'. Tower Hamlets Borough Council is addressing housing problems through a rolling programme of stock transfers. For example, tenants of the Leopold estate have recently voted by 63% to 37% on a 54% turnout to transfer their 373 homes to Poplar HARCA on the basis that a £30million regeneration programme will result. Government grants would support £7million of this. The estate was built in the 1960s and is now considered to have a cramped design with a maze of concrete corridors where vandalism and crime are perceived to be problems. The fabric of the buildings, including window frames and paintwork is in poor condition. The environment around the estate is considered to be poorly maintained.

Following the vote at Leopold, tenants at three other estates in Tower Hamlets: Island gardens, Island Homes and St. George's; have voted to support stock transfers with turnouts in excess of 43%. These three estates include 3,301 homes that will be transferred to Toynbee Island Homes and Eastend Homes. The Government and the Labour Party point out that they have found a way of making significant investment in the estates and that tenants in them are in support of the transfer. However, Syed Nurul Islam Dulu, the unsuccessful Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate for Bethnal Green & Bow said:

"I don't think people are happy about the transfer of the housing stock... Some people didn't understand the vote. Anyway, people have already decided not to vote because of other issues. Labour have not delivered what people need over the years and they have not solved the housing problem."

Whether 'Respect' will be able to halt the rolling programme of stock transfers and find an alternative means of funding social housing remains to be seen.

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The Future of Arms Length Management Organisations

The Arms Length Management Organisation sector is now well established, and leading Arms Length Management Organisations are seeking increased powers and flexibilities against a background of uncertainty about their futures after the Decent Homes Standard is achieved in 2010.

At present Arms Length Management Organisations are included within the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement and are prevented from borrowing money themselves. Instead they manage the investment that is funded by borrowing by their parent authorities. Local Authorities with Arms Length Management Organisations usually operate annual budget setting processes and implement annual reductions in management fees following reductions in stock following right to buy sales. This makes business planning in Arms Length Management Organisations difficult. Dennis Rees, Chair of Derby Homes said:

“Every time we lose a property we lose some of the management fee and that squeezes services to tenants.”

The Chartered Institute of Housing has recently published a report entitled ‘A future role for arms length management organisations’ and it is understood that its recommendations are being taken seriously by government. It puts forward three options for the future of arms length management:

- The government allows the Council to pay off its debt over a thirty year period, giving it greater freedom to borrow prudentially. The Council keeps control of the housing revenue account. The new business plan could be either limited to keeping homes up to the decent homes standard or expanded to give arms length management organisations a role in tackling anti-social behaviour, upgrading lifts and other regeneration work beyond the decent homes standard.
- The Council keeps its role as regulator and exercises control through the management agreement but the arms length management organisation becomes responsible for managing the housing revenue account.
- The Council transfers ownership of the arms length management organisation to tenants but can retain a minority share. Borrowing would be treated, as private sector and the Council would not be accountable for any business plan failure.

The latter option has been dubbed the ‘Community Ownership Model’ and would result in the Arms Length Management Organisation becoming a private sector organisation, owned by tenants, and able to operate outside the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement. The Council would offer the Arms Length Management Organisation a 35 year management contract giving it sufficient stability to become an attractive borrower in the eyes of financial institutions.

However, John Perry, Policy Adviser at the Chartered Institute of Housing, said:

“The starting point is breaking the link with the housing revenue account subsidy system... It is very difficult for Councils and hence Arms Length Management Organisations to keep any income they generate at the moment because it tends to get whisked into the subsidy system to help other councils.”

Joanne Rooney, Executive Director of Neighbourhoods at Sheffield City Council said:

“Councils such as mine, with Arms Length Management Organisations, and those thinking about them as a preferred option for investment, do need to reach a view about what they and their tenants want to do with their Arms Length Management Organisation.”

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"I believe that the future for an Arms Length Management Organisation will be influenced by the following things:

- How and why it was created in the first place*
- How effective and efficient it is at delivering excellent services and investing for tenants; and*
- Future funding opportunities*

"Although Councils will make the final decision, tenants must be balloted and fully consulted on the options.

"While Sheffield has only just started its process and is unlikely to decide on the future role of its Arms Length Management Organisation until 2009, there are considerable pressures now that potentially affect the Arms Length Management Organisation's future. These include the need for demonstrable efficiency, the impact of right to buy and renewed pressures on the housing revenue account and the stronger strategic influence of housing as a player in the creation of successful neighbourhoods.

"Already the reality and practicality of putting housing management in neighbourhoods at arms length to the council and other partners such as local regeneration boards, police and health is creating tension. This tension would be increased by putting Arms Length Management Organisations in competition for resources and business opportunities against successful community entrepreneurs and smaller housing associations.

"Local Authorities that think putting the housing management service into a separate body ends their involvement in the housing business are mistaken and will pay for it in their comprehensive performance assessment. And those who do so, but do not let go run the risk of stifling innovation and missing the potential to give tenants a real say in reshaping services which will be better and more efficient.

"Those Arms Length Management Organisations that are housing revenue account obsessive need to understand that their future funding solution needs to be part of the Council's funding solution to deliver sustainable communities. Either body deciding on their future direction separate from one another without any strategic framework or guiding principle is unlikely to be making the most from the opportunities the paper presents.

"The Arms Length Management Organisation/Council relationship is without doubt very difficult to negotiate through. Like in any relationship, expect difficult times, but by being clear from the start about how you will work together and what you want to achieve you just might get to stay in love!"

Another option would be for Arms Length Management Organisations to be wound up and services revert to the Council. This does not find favour with arms length management organisations. Dennis Rees, Chair of Derby Homes, said:

"I definitely would not want to go back to the Council because we (the tenants) would lose all the bargaining power that we have got."

It is unlikely that the government will wish to abandon the Arms Length Management Organisation initiative in 2010, but whether it will be prepared to remove all the restrictions that Arms Length Management Organisations and their parent Councils operate within is a different matter.

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Voluntary and Community Organisations to take 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' Initiatives

Voluntary and community organisations across England will receive £2.25 million over the next year from the Office of the Deputy Prime Ministers Special Grants Programme (SGP).

The SGP supports innovative work by voluntary and community sector organisations, who are exploring diverse ways of involving local people in improving the quality of our public spaces. The work supported by these grants delivers on issues contained in key national sustainability publications, including 'Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener', the 'Sustainable Communities Plan' and the 'Urban White Paper'.

Phil Hope, Minister in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"Forty work programmes across England have been selected in this year's round of SGP funding (2005-06) and will share £2.25 million. These include nine new work programmes, four of which have been awarded core funding. This core funding aims to develop long-term relationships with voluntary and community sector organisations whose core work supports the drive for 'cleaner, safer, greener communities'."

These nine organisations are:

- Living Streets, who aim to deliver and develop national policy to improve streets and public spaces, through community street audits, supporting volunteers and partnership working;
- The Tree Council, who are extending the Tree Wardens work programme into urban areas;
- The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, who run 'green' gym training programmes, promoting health and partnership working;
- The Field Studies Council, who aim to increase out of classroom learning activities in parks and open spaces in the pilot areas of London and Birmingham;
- The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens aims to support and promote new and existing local community based gardening and food production groups through developing community based networks;
- Engage, who aim to make public cultural spaces more youth friendly, empower young people to be involved in their spaces;
- The Interlink Foundation, who aim to improve the quality of public spaces, particularly the physical fabric and infrastructure of places;
- Help the Aged, who will establish 3 pilot projects of wardens' schemes for older people; and
- The Women's Environment Network will support a network of ethnic minority and disadvantaged women's groups to help them convert neglected spaces into community gardens.

Phil Hope continued:

"The Special Grants Programme represents a substantial commitment by the Government to supporting the community and voluntary sector. The new grants awarded will provide £2.3m to the nine new organisations over the lifetime of the SGP funding streams. "

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Small Business Friendly Concordat

On 1st March 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published a new code of practice that will require local authorities to minimise tender costs for contract bidders and settle invoices promptly so that small local firms can compete for their business. It is intended to tackle long-standing complaints that large companies have unfair advantages when bidding for Council contracts.

All authorities are being asked to sign the 'Small Business Friendly Concordat'. Local Government Minister, Phil Hope, said that it underpinned the 2.5% annual efficiency target that all councils have to meet under Sir Peter Gershon's review. He said:

"We want all Councils to recognise the contribution that small and medium enterprises can provide in delivering high quality public services. In particular, they can often respond quickly and flexibly to customer needs, providing innovation, ideas and improved service."

'AWICS' welcomes this new code and looks forward to continuing to respond quickly and flexibly to customer needs, providing innovation, ideas and improved service, to an increasing number of clients.

Government help for flood-hit areas of Cumbria

Cumbria County Council; Carlisle, Allerdale, Copeland, Eden and South Lakeland District Councils and Cumbria Police are to be given help with meeting the costs of clearing up following severe storm and flood damage in the Council areas between 7th and 12th January 2005, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Jim Fitzpatrick announced in a written statement to Parliament. Mr. Fitzpatrick said:

"Carlisle and large areas of Cumbria experienced exceptional storm and flood damage between 7th and 12th January 2005. Given these circumstances I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified. A scheme will therefore be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grants will be paid to the authorities to cover 85 per cent of the eligible costs above a threshold, which they have incurred in dealing with the storm and flood damage."

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