

# ***PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!***

# ***AWICS***

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



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**March 2004**

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## **Council Tax and Local Income Tax**

Average council tax increases for 2004/2005 will be about 7% following government threats to 'cap' proposed council tax increases in 65 authorities where the government believed those proposals were excessive.

Tabloid newspapers recently ran front-page stories that the government had taken a decision in principle to introduce a local income tax in addition to continuing with the Council Tax.

A good idea some might think. Keep the Council Tax because it is an efficient way of raising considerable sums of taxation, but recognise that its capacity is limited. Increase the proportion of local government funding that is raised locally by introducing a local income tax that can be collected by the inland revenue and in the process reduce 'gearing'. This would also address the perceived inequity of charging high levels of council tax to pensioners who own valuable houses but may have low incomes.

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However, the government is doing its best to play down these reports and insists that nothing will happen until after the Balance of Funding review reports with a menu of options in the summer of 2004. This will be followed by consultation and further research and it is likely that firm proposals would not appear until 2005. This would give the government the option of either including its proposals in their election manifesto (if it believed them to be popular) or leaving the matter under consideration until after the general election had been held.

In the meantime the Scottish Executive is expected to announce its own inquiry into the financing of local government in Scotland. This was agreed as part of the partnership agreement reached between Labour and Liberal-Democrat Members of the Scottish Parliament after the May 2003 elections. The delay has been caused by discussions on the scope of the inquiry but it is believed that these are now reaching a conclusion.

Protests against the Council Tax are becoming more organised. So, what sort of people can Councils expect to see leading the resistance against Council Tax? The answer is 'pensioners'! It is believed that many pensioners will see all the £2 a week increase in the basic state pension in April 2004 used to meet the costs of higher council tax bills. A spokesman for Help the Aged said: "There will inevitably be a fair degree of unrest as any increase in April above the cash increase in the state pension is just not going to be acceptable to pensioners."

Not only are pensioner groups organising mass demonstrations, but they are reported to be seeking 'grey martyrs' who will be trained in how to spearhead the resistance. This training will include how to refuse to pay Council Tax, how to deal with bailiffs, how to get around rules that allow authorities to deduct Council Tax from pensions and how to conduct themselves in court and prison.

So what can councils do about this? They could point out that pensioners on limited means can claim council tax benefit and many of them do. They could point out that increases in Council Tax are the result of government policy and that their hands are often tied at local level. However, it is difficult to explain the vagaries of local government finance in too much detail to a lay audience.

And what of the future? The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has published a study that concludes:

*"We are now forecasting that the current budget deficit will rise from £14billion to £21.6billion in 2005/2006. There is a roughly even chance that the Chancellor will break his golden rule of balancing current spending with current revenues."*

If this occurs it is likely that the government will be looking for more revenues rather than less!

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## **Local Government Act 2003 and Prudential Borrowing**

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
- Give councils new powers to trade and charge for non-statutory services
- Give small businesses and community amateur sports clubs a reduction in business rates
- Introduce Business Improvement Districts to enhance town centres and other areas
- Reward councils that promote business development in their areas by allowing them to keep a proportion of their local business rates

The prudential borrowing system will work well for projects that will achieve a financial return. For example, a leisure centre or toll road that will be able to generate sufficient income to meet capital repayments, or investment in information technology that will enable savings in salary budgets to be made.

Peter Morley, a member of the CIPFA steering group on prudential borrowing, said:

*“The relaxation of legislation that will allow authorities real freedom to borrow, invest and make money represents a remarkable turn around in government thinking.*”

*“The challenge for Chief Financial Officers is likely to be considerable. In the past Members tended to leave them to their own devices. Now they are likely to want a range of new financially innovative schemes – like local partnership revenue raising projects.”*

However, prudential borrowing may not work so well for authorities that wish to borrow money to invest in the housing stock. This is because rents are controlled by government and are increasingly deducted from payments of housing subsidy.

Neil Litherland, Director of Housing at Camden Borough Council, said:

*“We estimate that to borrow prudentially the same amount that we would get for setting up an almo £28million, it would cost every tenant in Camden £13 a week. We would never be able to add £13 onto the rent.”*

However, Elaine Elkington, Director of Housing at Hammersmith & Fulham Borough Council is more positive, and said:

*“We should be able to make big investment decisions on decent homes standards, reduce homelessness and put more money into neighbourhood renewal – government funding on this has been derisory.”*

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## What is E-Government?

E-Government is not an end in itself. It is at the heart of the drive to modernise government. Modernising local government is about enhancing the quality of local services and the effectiveness of local services

- **Transforming services** – making them more accessible, more convenient, more responsive and more cost-effective. It can make services more accessible to people with disabilities. It can make it easier to join up local services (within councils, between councils, and between councils and other public, voluntary and private agencies). It can help improve the customer's experience of dealing with local public services, whoever provides them.
- **Renewing local democracy** – making councils more open, more accountable, more inclusive and better able to lead their communities. E-Government can enhance the opportunities for citizens to debate with each other, to engage with their local services and councils, to access their political representatives and hold them to account. It can also support councillors in their executive, scrutiny and representative roles.
- **Promoting local economic vitality** – a modern communications infrastructure, a skilled workforce and the active promotion of e-business can help local councils and regions promote employment in their areas and improve the employability of their citizens.

Websites are an important part of e-government, and can be categorised as falling into four categories:

- **Promotional sites** provide information but little interaction.
- **Content sites** provide more sophisticated information and some interaction.
- **Content plus** sites provide very useful content and more advanced online self-service features.
- **Transactional sites** are accessible, complete, thoughtful and coherent with more than one type of online interaction (for example, payment, applications, consultation, bookings). The latest guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on *Implementing Electronic Government* guidance for 2003 (IEG3) issued to all local authorities in England says they should be aiming to achieve transactional sites by the end of 2005.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has published 'Defining e-government priority services and transformation outcomes in 2005 for local authorities in England.' This paper signals a shift away from looking at all services at once to the seven shared public service delivery priorities in the national strategy for local e-government: Schools; Services for children, young people, families at risk and older people; Healthier communities; Safer and stronger communities; the environment; Transport and the Local Economy. It also asks authorities to look beyond 2005 at the transformation of their internal business processes to take proper advantage of the efficiencies that new technologies can produce.

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It is considered that the key to making the most of e-government funding in future will be to focus on the services that people wish to use. There will be a need to focus on socio-economic service outcomes, internal business process improvement and increasing the use of services.

'Ambient Government' is seen by some as an appropriate objective. The concept is that information should be gathered only once from each citizen, and then shared between a wide range of public sector agencies as pre-agreed with that individual. Most activities of the citizen would be recorded – again as pre-agreed to comply with data protection law - and services would be delivered automatically as the system anticipated the citizen's needs and wishes. This would result in the public sector being transformed from a bureaucratic gatekeeper to a joined-up continuum of services that supports peoples' lives and is rarely if ever accessed consciously.

**Adrian Waite**

### **Good Practice in E-Government**

The Audit Commission has recently reported that central services at Dacorum Borough Council (including information & communications technology services) are good with promising prospects for improvement. It is also the case that the unit cost of information and communications technology services at Dacorum Borough Council are relatively low.

Dacorum Council's Call Centre started life as a service for the housing department. Users reported finding the services provided good. It has since taken on some additional functions without needing additional resources, including:

- Undertaking regular telephone surveys of users on behalf of council services
- Taking requests for the pest control service
- Taking payments of Council Tax by debit card
- Acting as a contact point for all recruitment enquiries to the Council

Dacorum council has recently improved its website. The Audit Commission found the site easy to navigate and clearly laid out. For example, the council tax page set out the service standards users can expect when paying their council tax, an explanation of the bill sent to tax payers and information about methods of payment. All the pages they looked at had clickable links to contact the council by e-mail and telephone contact information. The website also allows for service users to make transactions online either through electronic forms or by clickable e-mail links. Examples of the transactions currently available include:

- Payment of council tax, business rates, invoices and rents
- Notifying changes of address
- Requesting housing repairs
- Reporting missed refuse collections

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- Arranging collection of bulky items
- Reporting abandoned vehicles
- Reporting any cleansing oversight
- Making a complaint about council services
- Booking tickets for arts or entertainment venues

The Council has recently installed a new integrated software package for revenues and benefits. This should ultimately improve the service to customers by linking these departments with the housing department through the provision of a shared database leading to improvements in the speed and accuracy of processing claims.

Compared with other councils, Dacorum demonstrated:

- The lowest spend per employee (£763.47) and the lowest spend per desktop (£975.56)
- The service supports the third highest number of desk-top computers per IT employee (56.25). The highest number reported was 57.27.

In 2004 the Local Government Chronicle shortlisted three authorities for their awards for improving services with e-technology. Details are given below:

East Riding of Yorkshire Council actively adopts and promotes the use of e-technology to develop integrated services which reach into the community. The libraries e-access project helps to resolve the issues of rural isolation and encourages the use of e-technology to improve access to facilities and services for everyone.

The project has facilitated changes that have enabled the service to move on from one that had libraries with little or no public information technology resources and unskilled staff. In response to the governments demand to deliver their initiatives, the service now has 20 learning centres, two of which are travelling libraries, with a total of 126 computers and 153 skilled, knowledgeable, competent and confident staff.

The dedicated staff have risen to this challenge by:

- Meeting the expectations of the public
- Facilitating customer use of on line resources
- Building confidence in the use of online resources
- Building confidence in the use of e-systems within the community
- Bringing about significant cultural change.

This is supporting the council's aims to promote lifelong learning and improve social inclusion. Expanding on the implementation of a new library management system, e-enablement is ensuring access for all, irrespective of location. This is encapsulated in the council's vision of a virtual library which will further develop the ethos of e-enabled services.

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Halton Borough Council's Planning Department has adopted an overall strategy aimed at pushing forward service enhancement and improved productivity through using information and communications technology. To benefit its users it is using intranet geographic information systems, mobile geographic information systems, digital document imaging and online public consultation as well as digital data capture and conversion. E-technology is being used to deliver information direct to officers' computers thus reducing the time required to search for information. They have achieved:

- Digital document retrieval of closed case files via a central database and server arrangement
- Online planning applications
- Planning application information retrieval system.

Newcastle City Council recognises the condition of the local environment is a high priority and has decided to link the aim of improving the local environment with increased democratic accountability. The concept of 'ward stewardship' has been developed to enable residents' priorities to influence service priorities and investment decisions. This is done through an electronic interface so people can use their computer to access the service 24 hours a day and seven days a week. It fits with the e-government initiative and is helping to build capacity with community groups making the City a better place to live.

Newcastle City Council has also created a Customer Service Centre in the Civic Centre and is in the process of rolling out a number of local Customer Service Centres across the City. These centres will provide all the public services delivered by the Council including council tax, cashiers, housing benefit, housing repairs, envirocall, parking and complaints. Other services including Job Centre Plus, Connexions and the Inland Revenue also use the customer service centres to provide 'joined-up' government. This is done through a range of generic and specialist officers using a wide range of information and communications technology and systems.

**Adrian Waite**

### **Community Websites – Growing Phenomena!**

Community Websites are growing phenomena. The Caithness.org web site is an example of a local community web site that has grown massively since first starting four years ago. From a glimmer of an idea to save time in putting all the local information about voluntary groups in one place and have the ability to update it without the need to reprint local guides and the time and expense involved. The initial objective of a team of people putting together the information and learning how to create a web site was achieved very quickly with a short training course.

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The web site was launched on the same day the course started with everyone publishing their first page about themselves on the web site. This followed with the basic structure and individual pages being set up for every group in the county in following weeks. A very repetitive process but made everyone learn how to work very quickly and within three months of very part time work most groups in Caithness had a page at no cost to them.

Developing the site went on but it became clear that it was not sustainable in the longer term using part time volunteer labour as the site was growing in many directions and was almost a full time occupation. Two models for continuation were looked at by Bill Fernie - the funded charitable model and the business route. The charitable funded route did not appear to have a long term future as no funders would guarantee that funding would continue after an initial period even if it was used as a training centre.

Community web sites are still being launched all over the country and have many different goals and ambitions but common to most is the desire to let folk know what the area has to offer both for local people and visitors.

The vision that grew in with Caithness.org was to combine a range of information that would be of interest and useful. This merging of what might interest tourists and local social and community information lent itself to more of a magazine style. To sustain the whole thing a business was set up to capitalise on the growing fame of Caithness.org which was winning prizes such as the Yell.com Award for Best Community web site and Best in the UK.

The site has grown to have over 30,000 pages and 20,000 photographs with new content daily. The audience is huge and growing with nearly 5000 visitors a day and the one million a year having been passed a few months ago (hit rate is 6 million per month). The site has over 200 updating news pages and the range of topics continues to grow. With chat rooms and message boards offering a range of services such as classified ads free of charge there is likely to be further growth. Half the visitors are from outwith the area and regulars come in from around the globe.

Why is the site so successful? A question we ask all the time. We reckon its down to Entertainment and Information. The photographs are nearly all local and show both the area and events. New information comes in constantly now everyone realises they can share for free and see it on fast. Is Caithness.org completed and what's next? Absolutely it never will be as plans to add video and take advantage of Broadband when it comes are already under discussion. The talking web site. Not pie in the sky as we have already tested a prototype idea - you talk the web site talks back - you 'aint' seen 'nuthin' yet on Caithness.org.

Cllr. Bill Fernie, Highlands Council  
[www.caithness.org](http://www.caithness.org)

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## **Transactional Websites for Revenues & Benefits**

In October 2003 Guildford Borough Council heralded the arrival of its online housing benefit claim form. The online form looks just like the paper version with the detailed text and graphics, there are help messages which appear to guide the customers.

The issue of field activation/deactivation is one of the most powerful features of the software. The form is constantly monitoring what the customer enters into it and then it will either activate or deactivate fields and whole pages depending on whether the information is required or not in light of the previous question, the form will work out which parts can be ignored and which parts have to be filled in, this should make the form much easier to fill in online than the paper version. This should also result in the council receiving less incorrectly completed forms, which should mean that the benefits could be sorted out much quicker.

To help customers who are paying for their internet services by the minute the form can be completed off line, also you do not have to complete it all in one sitting; you can save it and come back to it at a later point. The declaration is often said to be one of the reasons why online won't work. However the form gets round this by summarising all inputs the customer has made and allows the customer to print the details off and sign it. The main form is emailed back to the council and the signed declaration follows along with any documentation that may be required.

The question has to be asked about the advantages of this. If you still have to send the required items to the council by post then how much quicker is it really going to be?

Also how many people that are claiming Housing Benefit actually have access to computers and the Internet?

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2003 the E-billing order came into force allowing billing authorities to serve both council tax and non-domestic rate demand notices electronically. The demand notices can either be served as an attachment to an e-mail or via a secure website. However this can only be done if the customer agrees to it and provides a valid e-mail address.

A good Document Image Processing system will certainly help a revenues & benefits service with customer service. Any customer may find out almost immediately, through a telephone call or a visit to the office, if the revenues service has received their claim form, letter or verification. Time is saved filing and retrieving papers, but not as much time is saved by the customer because they still either have to call the office or go in person, when they should be able to find out online instantly if the council have received the form, either via e-mail or a secure web site.

**Linda Mackay**

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### **Redcar & Cleveland Council's pride at first fair deal for town hall workers**

In January 2004, Redcar and Cleveland Council become the first local authority in the North East to complete an amicable agreement with the unions to ensure hundreds of its lowest-paid workers will enjoy a better, fairer pay deal from April 2004.

The Council gave final approval to a single status agreement for all staff at meetings in Eston Town Hall. It followed months of negotiations with the Town Hall unions, supported by ACAS.

The Council's Cabinet Member for Corporate Resources, Councillor Glyn Nightingale said: *"This is a proud and historic day for the Council and the most important outcome of any decision yet taken by the new Coalition administration. We are in the forefront of councils nationwide with this ground-breaking settlement."*

John McCormack, Unison's Redcar and Cleveland branch secretary and secretary of the Joint Trade Unions, said: *"We are extremely pleased for the majority of our members and in the present financial climate we have struck the best deal possible."*

Pay increases will benefit 3,900 of the Council's lower paid staff, mainly women, in posts including cooks, cleaners and home care staff. The rises are set to range from a few hundred pounds up to £5,000 - as much as 40 per cent up on the previous basic wage.

The Council is also making written offers to 2,600 women and a small number of men of ex-gratia payments, some over £6,000, for "hurt feelings" over perceived sex discrimination and their patience for not making claims against the Council.

The detailed analysis of jobs has identified 1,600 posts where pay rates reduce, but, in agreement with the unions, staff affected – the majority are clerical grades - will be integrated in a three-year tapering pay protection scheme before moving to their new pay levels.

Councillor Nightingale said: *"Seven out of ten among our lower paid staff will benefit from higher pay. Dealing with the remainder is a delicate issue and we are committed to doing all we can to treat affected staff with sympathy and support during the adjustment process."*

*"They will be given an opportunity to have their situation reviewed, gain extra skills to increase their job evaluation score and get financial advice from the Council."*

Mr McCormack said: *"We are disappointed that the protection arrangements weren't longer, but hopefully by the end of the three-year period, most of the problems will have been resolved."*

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The cost of paying the ground-breaking deal, which will now be used as a model for the region's Town Hall employers, is £1.8m and will result in a 4.5 per cent increase on this year's Council Tax bills, exactly £43.22 a year more on Band D – virtually the whole of the expected Council Tax rise.

To pay the ex-gratia element of the deal will cost an additional £3.5million, which will be paid out of current funds which the Council had already set aside for that purpose.

Councillor Nightingale explained: *"The Government have not helped us on this issue. They have forced us to pay this out of Council Tax and refused to allow the Council to use its borrowing powers.*

*"But the single status issue had to be resolved to settle a long-standing injustice. We have grasped the nettle. The Council Tax will rise, but we are confident our agreement will stand up to the most rigorous scrutiny and show it represents value for money."*

Staff will be given a detailed breakdown of the deal at a series of nine road shows, hosted by the Council's Chief Executive Colin Moore.

The 140 workers who have lodged equal pay claims at an employment tribunal will not be excluded from the offer of ex-gratia payments in settlement of their claims.

Councillor Nightingale added: *"We have 140 people who have lodged claims with a tribunal. That is their right and they are entitled to do so.*

*"They were promised exaggerated amounts of money for January 19, but ten days later nothing has materialised and it is unlikely to do so for some time yet.*

*"Our staff have a choice – tax free cash now or an unknown amount of money, taxed with legal fees deducted at an unknown time in the future."*

Paul Daniel, Redcar & Cleveland Council

### **Training Courses on Offer**

#### **Seeking Sustainable Funding**

Adrian Waite will speak on 'Managing Core Costs' at the conference on 'Seeking Sustainable Funding' organised by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2004 in London.

For more information or to book online visit:

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/asp/search/ncvo/main.aspx?siteID=1&sID=5&documentID=1445&viewType=6>

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### **Housing Finance Explained**

Manchester (2<sup>nd</sup> March 2004), London (4<sup>th</sup> March 2004), Birmingham (10<sup>th</sup> March 2004), London (24<sup>th</sup> March 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:

<http://www.hqnetwork.org.uk/documents/HFX%20Brochure.pdf>

### **CIPFA Accounting Conference**

Adrian Waite will be the breakout speaker for Housing Finance Current Issues at the Local Authority Accounting Conference on 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> 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 contact Adrian Waite at: [Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk](mailto:Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk).

### **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](mailto:Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk) or 017683-52347.

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