

PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!

AWICS

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

Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited



**September &
October 2004**

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

AWICS launches new Website

Our new Website was launched at the end of July making it even easier to access information about the company, our services, and the information about public services that is posted there. The web address www.awics.co.uk remains the same, but everything else is changed!

The Website has a home page, and seven areas of information:

- About us – find out about 'AWICS', its Director, staff and associates
- Services – find out what services we have to offer
- Briefing Papers – download useful information about public services
- Newsletter – download the current edition of 'Public Services News' and back copies
- Contact us – contact 'AWICS' about our services, ask questions or give feedback
- Opportunities – find out if there are any opportunities at 'AWICS' for you!
- Fenland Independent Tenants Advisor – web pages devoted to the work that we are doing for the tenants of Fenland

Why not take a look at the Website and let us know what you think?

Appleby Business Centre, Bridge Street, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria CA16 6QH
Telephone: 017683-52347 or 52165 Mobile: 07971-321863. Fax: 017683-52546.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk.

Director: Adrian Waite MA CPFA ACIH FIPSM.
Company Number: 3713554. VAT Registration Number: 721 9669 13

Comprehensive Spending Review 2004

The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the outcome of the 2004 Comprehensive Spending Review to Parliament on 12th July 2004. As significant increases in expenditure on health and education had already been announced, and as increases in government revenues were forecast to slow, a generous settlement was not expected for other services.

However, while total spending remained unchanged, at £580billion for 2007/2008, a drop in the costs of servicing debt and unemployment meant more cash could be channelled into departmental budgets.

The main theme of the comprehensive spending review, though, was to combine increased investment in frontline services with challenging targets for efficiency savings across the public sector. These efficiency savings are based on the conclusions of the Gershon report that concluded that savings of 2.5% a year could be made across the whole public sector, principally through improved procurement and the increased use of e-technology. A programme of public asset sales to raise £30billion over the next ten years was also announced.

The main headlines were:

- Overall spending to increase by 2.8% in real terms in 2006 to 2008. Savings on debt interest and unemployment benefits mean overall departmental spending will rise in real terms by 4.2% annually.
- Public spending by government departments will rise from £279.3billion this year to £301.9billion next year to £321.4billion in 2006/2007 and £340.5billion in 2007/2008.
- A gross reduction of 84,150 civil servants by Whitehall and a further 20,000 by the devolved administrations.
- 20,030 civil service jobs will be moved out of the southeast.
- £6billion of savings in procurement by 2008, contributing to £21.5billion of savings overall
- £30billion from sale of government assets

The amount allocated to departments is to rise by 5.5% in 2005/2006 but subsequent increases in the next two years will fall to 3.6% and 3.1%. The increases are to be paid for from a combination of much smaller increases in some departments, such as the Foreign Office and the Department of Trade & Industry and projected efficiency savings. The overall growth in this year's review is lower than in the 2002 review and neutral over the review's three years.

Total spending, set out in the budget, is still to rise from £488billion in 2004/2005 to £580billion in 2007/2008. Next year, the first of the three years covered by the review, is the last in terms of the surge in spending with real spending growth of 4.2%. After that, public spending will increase in real terms by 2.5% in 2006/2007 and 2.9% in 2007/2008 – the last two years of the review. This equates to an annual average of 3.2% over the review's three years, which is neutral since it is roughly in line with the economy's projected growth rate.

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Economists consider that the room for gaining from further improvements in macro-economic performance is now small. The Treasury forecasts the average surplus on the current budget at 0.1% of gross domestic product between 1999/2000 and 2005/2006 and again between 2005/2006 and 2008/2009. This means that the 'golden rule' that current spending must be met by current revenues over the time of an economic cycle will only just be met, leaving no room for error or for additional spending on public services.

The scope for moving resources into frontline public services from elsewhere is also reducing. Debt interest has already fallen from 3.6% of gross domestic product to 2%, while unemployment benefit has fallen from 1% of gross domestic product to 0.3%. With net debt forecast to increase as a proportion of gross domestic product and levels of employment already high, further savings in these areas are unlikely. This means that expenditure on public services can only increase at a faster rate than gross domestic product if efficiency savings are found. It is therefore unsurprising that the government is seeking reforms aimed at greater efficiencies.

The Comprehensive Spending Review 2004 is set in a different context to the previous comprehensive spending reviews of the current government. Resources are more constrained and there is less room for manoeuvre. This means that expenditure on public services can only increase at a faster rate than gross domestic product if efficiency savings are found. It is therefore unsurprising that the government is seeking reforms aimed at greater efficiencies. This means that it is about redistributing resources and finding improvements in efficiency rather than distributing increased budgets. Hence the conclusion of many commentators that this has been a relatively 'boring' Comprehensive Spending Review.

As expected, health and education continue to be the government's main spending priorities, and other services have seen relatively modest increases in their resources.

The strategy behind the Comprehensive Spending Review 2004 is dependent on the public sector realising the savings that have been identified as part of the Gershon review. Social housing is expected to play its part in realising these savings and in providing improved services from smaller budgets. Most of these savings are expected to arise from improvements in procurement and from reductions in staffing due to the implementation of e-government.

Most commentators expect that a general election will be held in 2005 and that a new government at the beginning of its term will carry out the Comprehensive Spending Review 2006. By then, the Treasury's projections of future revenue will have been subjected to a 'reality check' as will Sir Peter Gershon's projection of efficiency savings. This combination of circumstances should make the Comprehensive Spending Review 2006 a little less 'boring' than the Comprehensive Spending Review 2004!

Adrian Waite

A full briefing paper is available at www.awics.co.uk/briefing/finance.asp

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Rent Restructuring Review

The government published its three-year review of rent restructuring in July 2004. The review has concluded the policy is working well but needs some fine-tuning in running the ten-year social rent restructuring programme established in April 2002. However, it has resulted in some interesting proposals for changes to the process. The consultation period closes on 30th September 2004. Local authorities and housing associations should spend the intervening period assessing the implications of the proposals for themselves and should consider making appropriate representations to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Over a ten-year period from April 2002, councils and housing associations are being encouraged to set their rents within 5% of the levels given by a national formula that reflects a property size, location and condition. The government's objective is to achieve a structure of social rents where:

- Social rents are affordable and well below those in the private sector
- Social rents are fairer and less confusing for tenants
- There is a closer link between rents and the qualities which tenants value in properties
- Unjustifiable differences between the rents set by local authorities and housing associations are removed

The government also wants rent restructuring to prepare the way for the extension of reforms to housing benefit to tenants in the social sector. The government intends to pilot a local housing allowance in the social housing sector as soon as practicable. This will cause similar social tenants renting similar homes in the same area to have very similar rents regardless of their landlord. It will put at end to the pre-2002 situation in which the rents charged by neighbouring councils for similar properties could vary by a third or more, and housing associations could charge over half as much again as councils for similar properties in the same area.

With the reforms, social rents will generally be higher for larger properties in areas of high house prices and earnings – such as London and the South East – and lower for smaller properties in areas of low house prices and earnings such as Northern conurbations. The government considers that social rents will remain affordable – at well below private sector levels in most areas. Council rents will, on average, increase at only about half the rate at which they went up over the last ten years. Housing association rents will also, on average, increase much more slowly than over the last ten years.

A cap has been set on the weekly rent any social tenant will pay as a result of the reforms, for example £106.60 for a 4-bedroom home in 2004/05. Lower figures apply for smaller properties. Where rents are already higher than this, they should be gradually reduced in real terms. For the small number of properties affected by the safeguard, the maximum increase in future years will be retail price index plus 1% a year. Social landlords are also expected to ensure no tenant faces a rent increase of more than the retail price index plus 0.5% plus £2 a week a year.

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Research was carried out as part of the review that examined the experience of rent restructuring in six local authorities and six housing associations. The research concluded that:

- The case study landlords would remain financially viable after the full introduction of rent restructuring
- In general the affordability of restructured rents (under the current housing benefit system) should not materially worsen and in some cases will improve.
- Significant compression in rent structures is taking place
- The current policy framework will not achieve harmonisation of rents between local authority and registered social landlord sectors by March 2012

The review concluded that the basic policy is sound, and made the following recommendations for technical improvements which are now open for wider consultation:

- Larger Properties – higher bedroom weights for three- and four- bed properties, and new, higher weightings for properties with five and six (or more) bedrooms
- Harmonisation – from April 2005, using the same formula for restructuring local authority rents as that currently used for restructuring registered social landlords' rents, and adopting the retail price index as the inflation measure used in calculating local authority rent increases
- Implementation – local authorities should ignore the downward limit of retail price index plus 0.5% minus £2 per week on rent changes, in order to achieve restructuring on all properties for which rents need to fall by 2011/2012. The Housing Corporation should also encourage associations to do the same, where their finances permit.

The review steering group calculate that the combined impact of the proposals would increase local authority rents (compared to existing policy) by about 40p per week in 2005/2006, rising to about £2.60 per week in real terms by 2011/2012. Individual tenants will continue to be protected by the policy's limit of retail price index plus 0.5% plus £2 per week on annual rent increases and by the caps on maximum rent levels.

The review steering group concludes that:

- Although the policy is generally working well, the proposed changes to the policy will ensure a fairer pattern of rent differentials between properties of different sizes. They will also simplify the policy by adopting a common formula for all council and housing association properties.
- Social tenants will continue to benefit from rents that are well below what the private sector would charge for similar properties. And the government is committed to ensuring that social housing remains affordable for people on low incomes. Tenants will continue to be protected from large or sudden rent increases.

Adrian Waite

A full briefing paper is available at www.awics.co.uk/briefing/housing.asp

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Independent Tenants' Advice in Action

'AWICS' has now been in place as Independent Tenants Advisor at Fenland for three months and is already having a significant impact on the stock options appraisal process and the empowerment of tenants in general.

Adrian Waite as Independent Tenants' Advisor has now held meetings with all the Tenants' Associations in Fenland and has received feedback from tenants through the telephone helpline and the Website. Meetings have been held in places including village halls and sheltered housing schemes. One of the meetings in a rural area led to the establishment of a new tenants' association. Focus groups are being established for groups of tenants in all parts of Fenland including 'hard to reach' groups. Newsletters have been circulated to all tenants, and the local press has given prominent coverage to 'Options Fenland'.

A questionnaire has been circulated to all tenants asking them for their views on what improvements they would like to see to their homes and neighbourhoods: The 'Fenland Standard'. Responses have been received from 36% of tenants that represents a very high response rate.

A new Website was also launched on 31st July 2004 that contains:

- A home page that explains the role of the Independent Tenants' Advisor
- A page on the 'Fenland Standard' from which tenants can download a copy of the questionnaire
- A page about the tenants' freephone hotline (0800-085-8616) and from where feedback can be given online.
- A page of information about 'Options Fenland' and related subjects

The Website address is: www.awics.co.uk/fenlandita

Adrian Waite said:

"The new website will give tenants yet another way of getting information about 'Options Fenland' and of raising concerns and having their say. I will be keeping the site up to date with new information as 'Options Fenland' progresses.

"Tenants do not have to have their own computer to look at the site. The Libraries service has a 'Peoples Network' which means that there are computers in the libraries at Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech that tenants can use free of charge to look at the website. If anyone needs help with the computers, library staff will be pleased to help.

"All the information on the site is also available to tenants in other ways."

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George Hawkins, Chair of the Tenants' Forum and the 'Options Fenland' Working Group, said:

"We are determined to use every method possible to give tenants information and to help them to get involved. We have already held meetings, issued newsletters and launched a telephone helpline. This new Website is an important extra way of allowing tenants to get involved. I would encourage tenants to look at the Website either at home or at the library.

"The government is encouraging local authorities, tenants' associations and their advisers to make more use of 'e-government' and to work in partnership. This is a good example of this in practice."

Already a pattern is beginning to emerge about the concerns of Fenland tenants.

In many areas tenants are concerned about the lack of affordable housing. House prices and rents in the private sector are increasing significantly in many areas while fewer council homes will be available in future because of the 'right to buy'.

Elderly tenants who wish to move to bungalows are sometimes finding difficulty in doing so.

Tenants are generally satisfied with their homes, but there are concerns about repairs not being carried out promptly, tenants not being informed when repairs are to be carried out and the standard of repairs not always being good.

Maintenance of Grounds is an issue across the district with complaints of poor maintenance of open spaces, problems with the garden maintenance scheme, flooding, lack of control of weeds, rose bushes dying off and overgrown bushes. There are some complaints about accumulations of rubbish. Tenants believe that standards of grounds maintenance have got worse over the last six years.

In some parts of Fenland there are concerns about ant-social behaviour.

In rural areas some tenants feel that their concerns can be ignored.

All of these concerns are being logged by the Independent Tenants' Advisor and will contribute towards the creation of the 'Fenland Standard'. The options appraisal will then look at ways of resolving the problems that have been identified by tenants.

In the meantime we have facilitated an audit of the skills of active tenants using self-assessment techniques. This has identified a need for training in a variety of subjects. Sessions have already been held with tenants on financial issues that have succeeded in explaining a complex subject in an understandable way. Further sessions on other subjects are planned.

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How to reverse economic decline in rural areas – a case study in Cumbria

It was recently announced that average income in Cumbria had fallen from 92% of the national average to 77% of the national average, meaning that the Cumbrian economy is performing worse than any other part of England. This is despite the fact that Cumbria enjoys scenery that is famous the world over, average unemployment levels, higher than average levels of self-employment and has had the benefit of a succession of development and regeneration initiatives delivered at significant cost by a multiplicity of agencies. Clearly the existing approaches are failing!

The Cumbrian Economic Intelligence Partnership has recently predicted the continued decline of the economy unless major change happens quickly. They point to the following issues with the local economy:

- Industrial decline, especially in Furness and West Cumbria leading to industrial dereliction, poor housing, unemployment and low educational achievement.
- Dependence on manufacturing (including nuclear waste reprocessing and shipbuilding) that is vulnerable to market fluctuations and currently in decline
- Inward investment is constrained by location and poor transport links
- There are few graduate opportunities and no indigenous university
- Environmental considerations constrain market-led growth in population, housing and employment
- A lack of core financial and business service businesses

The report suggests that the problems be addressed by economic agencies across Cumbria working together to secure:

- Economic Development as a primary objective with a formulated economic development strategy, with sufficient resource and power to drive that strategy forward, with the vision to conceive of major investment projects which attract significant private/public investment and with an open-to-business attitude
- A major change to regional planning policies (outside the National Parks) so the county is open to population growth and housing development in areas where people want to live, and actual stimulus to the development of, and immigration to, new settlements
- Concerted efforts to obtain sufficient national funding to greatly improve road access to Furness and West Cumbria and to retain and expand levels of other regeneration funding.
- Strong efforts to further develop the Cumbria University concept in order to retain more talented young people in Cumbria and to attract students from elsewhere.

Cumbria County Council has responded to this by identifying its key projects:

- Secure benefit from the Nuclear Decommissioning Agency being in the county
- Develop Carlisle Airport
- Redevelop Barrow Port
- Develop the M6 corridor
- A Cumbria University

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These ideas seem depressingly like 'more of the same' and are therefore unlikely to deliver major gains:

First, many of the proposals are dependent on central government changing the law (for example on planning constraints in rural areas) that is unlikely.

Second, many of the schemes require significant financial support from government that is not forthcoming. Ideas such as a bridge across Morecambe Bay, a fully operational regional airport at Carlisle, a University of the Lakes would all cost significant sums of money.

Third, there is still an obsession with large-scale economic activity of a sort that has been unsuccessful in the past and is now even more inappropriate to a largely rural county. Political influence resulted in BNFL coming to West Cumbria but employment levels have not been sustained and 'collateral damage' has been done to the tourist industry. More recently, political influence brought call centres to West Cumbria – but where are they now? Gone.

Fourth, there is the continued use of a multiplicity of agencies to deliver economic regeneration. The Business Gazette recently reported that:

“Someone coming to Cumbria from outside the county – and even many already here – would be forgiven for being confused by the number of bodies there are in the county set up to boost the economy, help the residents, attract in jobs, help businesses gain grants – from Business Link to Cumbria Inward Investment Agency, via Furness Enterprise, West Lakes Renaissance, Rural Regeneration Cumbria, Local Strategic Partnerships and more.”

Perhaps more consideration should be given to the findings of the Economic Intelligence Partnership report. It found that there is too great a dependency on manufacturing and too few financial and business services, and that poor communications were a disincentive to investment. One form of communication that is not affected by distances, mountains or lakes is electronic. Businesses that communicate through the Internet are at an advantage in Cumbria as they can surf the worldwide web from a modestly priced Cumbrian office while their staff can live in a high quality environment. Perhaps encouraging a large number of small businesses of this type would be more effective than encouraging another large enterprise that requires public subsidy and is ultimately unsustainable.

Another issue to consider is how to 'plug the leaks' in the local economy. Cumbrian organisations frequently source their supplies from outside the county. This includes the local authorities. How much of Cumbria County Council's £600million budget is actually spent in Cumbria? Could public authorities in Cumbria give commercial organisations a lead by sourcing more locally and developing local supply networks? This would retain the money in the economy that is already there and ensure that any additional funding that is secured actually benefits the local economy.

Adrian Waite

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New European Education, Training and Youth Programmes

The European Commission published 'Building our common future: policy challenges and budgetary means of the enlarged union 2007-2013' that identified developing European citizenship an essential priority in February 2004. In March this was followed by 'making citizenship work: fostering European culture and diversity through programmes for youth, culture, audiovisual and civic participation'. At the same time the commission reviewed its policy and priorities to produce a new generation of community programmes for mobility and co-operation in education and training. All these schemes are subject to ratification in 2005.

The new education and training programmes will consist of:

- A new integrated programme for mobility and co-operation in lifelong learning covering education and training
- A new 'Tempus plus' programme for co-operation between member states and bordering countries and the existing Tempus countries covering the whole spectrum of education and training

These programmes are designed to achieve the goal, set at the Lisbon European Council in 2000 of making Europe the most competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010 while strengthening social cohesion. Education and training has a central role in achieving this.

The integrated programme will be allocated a budget of E13.62billion, will run for seven years and will include:

- Comenius for school education – 5% of pupils and teachers involved by 2010
- Erasmus for all forms of learning at university level – 3 million students by 2010.
- Leonardo da Vinci for initial and continuing vocational education and training – 150,000 trainee placements a year by 2013.
- Grundtvig for adult education – 25,000 adults learning and teaching abroad a year by 2013.

There will also be a new generation of youth programmes called 'Youth in Action'. The objectives are:

- Promoting young people's active citizenship in general and their European citizenship in particular
- Developing young people's solidarity, in particular to reinforce social cohesion in the European Union
- Fostering mutual understanding between peoples through young people contributing to developing the quality of support systems for youth activities and the capabilities of civil society organisations in the youth field.
- Promoting European co-operation in youth policy.

The proposed budget for 'Youth in Action' is E915million for the seven years of the programme.

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Redcar & Cleveland pioneer Citizens' Panel

Redcar and Cleveland Council has launched a massive recruiting drive – to find 1,800 residents willing to become members of a new citizens panel.

The panel, christened Viewfinder, will be expected to complete four or five questionnaires a year, giving their views on a wide range of issues.

The results will be analysed and reported to councillors and the Council's Corporate Management Team to help them plan and deliver services to meet the public's needs.

A total of 18,000 residents, from different age groups and ethnic backgrounds, selected at random from the Council's electoral roll, have received a letter from the Council's Chief Executive Colin Moore and the Council's Cabinet Member for Corporate Resources Councillor Glyn Nightingale, asking them to join Viewfinder.

In the letter, Councillor Nightingale explains:

“The idea behind Viewfinder is simple. Every day, organisations that provide public services in Redcar and Cleveland make decisions and spend public money in a way that affects you.

“Viewfinder is your chance to influence their thinking, decision-making and the way they spend your money.

“For example, we might want to ask you what you think about the quality of life in your local area or what you think our priorities should be. We could ask for your views on how you think the Council should spend its budget or how we could improve any of our services.

“And we won't just ask you about the Council. Other organisations, such as the police or health service, may want to include questions about services they provide.”

The Council created the panel in late August, with the first questionnaire in circulation in September.

A newsletter will be sent out with every questionnaire and the reports from each survey will be available on the Council's Website, www.redcar-cleveland.gov.uk

Paul Daniel, Redcar & Cleveland Council

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AWICS to hold Housing and Regeneration Conference in September 2005

We have decided to hold a major conference in London in September 2005 that will focus on current issues in housing and regeneration. This will include:

- Ensuring adequate provision of affordable social housing in high value areas and growth areas
- Housing Market Renewal in low demand areas
- Regenerating the inner city – the links between housing and other services
- Community based approaches to regeneration
- How Housing Associations and Arms Length Management Companies can promote regeneration
- Rural Regeneration

'AWICS' Director, Adrian Waite, will chair the conference and the speakers will include 'AWICS' associates and guest speakers with recognised expertise.

If you would like to be sent details of the conference, please e-mail: conference@awics.co.uk, telephone 017683-52347, or fax 017683-52546.

Adrian Waite to speak at CIPFA seminar on Current Developments in Housing Finance

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy has arranged a seminar on 'Current Developments in Housing Finance' that will be held on 5th November 2004 at the Radisson SAS Portman Hotel in London. Adrian Waite will speak at a session on 'Options Appraisal' that is designed for people whose authorities have not yet completed the appraisal process. The session will look at the financial implications of each option.

For further details e-mail: conference@awics.co.uk, telephone 017683-52347, or fax 017683-52546.

Services on offer!

'AWICS' also offers a wide range of management consultancy and training courses in management and financial topics. These include: Business and Best Value Reviews, Financial Advice on Procurement, Housing Finance, Public Authority accounting, Performance Management, Lecturing and Training. For further information, please contact Adrian Waite on Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk or 017683-52347.

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Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited, Appleby Business Centre, Bridge Street, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6QH. Tel: 017683-52347 or 52165. Mobile: 07971-321863. Fax: 017683-52546. E-mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk

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