PUBLIC SERVICES NEWS!

AWICS

Independence…..Integrity…..Value

Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited

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Contents:

'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.

Housing Association Finance

Housing Association accounts for 2006/07, analysed in 'Global Accounts' by the Housing Corporation show that the sector has continued to grow in a balanced fashion in 2007 and at a slightly faster rate than the previous year. Turnover is up 9.4% to £9.1billion, while the surplus before tax has grown by 8.4% to £270million. The increase in turnover is largely driven by the increase in unit numbers, both from the transfer of stock from local authorities and the construction of new homes by existing associations. Both of these activities require associations to take on additional debt and in the year debt has risen by 9.2% to £30.9billion, whilst the gross book value of associations' housing properties stood at £77.4billion, up 10% on 2006. This has been done while constraining the growth in interest costs to 9.2% at £1.9billion.

The sector also continues to have significant capacity for more development. The capacity models submitted to the Housing Corporation show associations planning on drawing down £17billion over the next five years. The financial strength of Housing Associations and the degree of financial support that they enjoy from government makes the financial sector keen to lend to Housing Associations. For example, Housing Associations borrowed £29billion from the financial sector in 2006.

In fact, Housing Associations have now generated such surpluses that the Treasury has expressed concern. The government and Housing Corporation have concluded that there is potential for Housing Associations to make more use of their own resources and borrowing to support the development of new affordable housing. They are therefore looking for Housing Associations to develop at a lower rate of grant.

However, analysis of the 2007 accounts of Housing Associations suggests that their capacity to fund an increased proportion of development from their own resources varies between regions. Capacity is found in the south but not in the north, with London, southern and western housing associations reporting surpluses of £335million and northern and midland housing associations reporting deficits of £64million.

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The main financial issues that currently affect Housing Associations are:

- Stock Transfers
- The Efficiency Agenda
- Mergers
- Development of New Affordable Housing

During the two years between March 2005 and March 2007 Housing Associations' have increased the value of their housing assets by £13.2billion from £64.2billion to £77.4billion – an increase of 21%. This increased value was funded as follows:

	£billion	Notes
Long-term loans	5.6	The main source of funding
Increased capital grants	3.6	27% of the total
Increased revaluation reserve	2.0	The result of revaluations
Increased long-term creditors	1.4	An interesting development
Other sources	0.6	
Total	13.2	

While an operating surplus of £1.4billion was achieved in 2006/07, without the £0.6billion surplus on asset sales Housing Associations would have failed to have made a surplus for the year. Other major issues shown in the 2006/07 accounts are:

- The level of Homebuy activity has increased significantly to exceed £1billion for the first time.
- The balance sheet remains 'lowly geared'. Using the measurement preferred by the Housing Corporation (adjusted net leverage) the gearing stands at 39.5% in 2007, down from 39.8% in 2006.
- External debt exceeded £30billion for the first time, with external debt exceeding social housing grant for only the second year. However, the increase in borrowing is partly driven by stock transfer that is funded solely through external debt. In traditional (non-stock transfer) housing associations there is still more social housing grant than external debt.
- The growth in the sector has been weighted more to traditional associations than in the previous year.
- Turnover has risen by 9.4% to £9,117million, while operating costs have grown more slowly (by 7.8%) to £7,466million. The operating surplus has risen by 12% to £1,417million.
- There is continued growth in the surplus on disposals that has increased by 9% to £542million. However, the rate of growth is slowing.
- The growth in capital financing costs in the income and expenditure account at 7.3% has been less than the increase in debt at 9.2%. However, when capitalised interest is taken into account an increase of 9.3% has been recorded taking the total to £1,912million. This has been achieved despite increases in the base rate.
- Rent income has increased by 7.7% and service charges by 14% giving a combined total of £7,337million. However, most of this increase is accounted for by the increased number of homes due to new build and stock transfer. The increase in the average rent and service charges per home is 2.3%.
- Some costs are growing more rapidly than income. Management costs, for example, increased by 6.7% a unit.
- Voids at 2.3% and bad debts at 1.0% are at historically low levels.
- Turnover on non-social housing activities totals £1,278million, representing 14% off total turnover. This proportion has remained fairly constant over the last three years.

The 2008 series of regional seminars 'All You Want to Know about Housing Association Finance' is being held at various venues in England until June 2008. Details can be found on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/housingassociationfinancecourse.asp

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Government to Review Housing Revenue Account System

The Housing Subsidy system enables the government to exercise considerable control over local authority housing finance. This degree of control is increasing as the changes to the system that are associated with rent restructuring are implemented. The government is moving to a situation where all rents will be determined at national level through the rent restructuring formulae. Furthermore, as formula rents will be used to calculate both actual rents and the guideline rent that is used to calculate housing subsidy, the government will effectively take all the rent income away from authorities. Authorities will then be given back what the government considers that they should spend. As a result, government also determines Housing Revenue Account budgets. The ability that councils used to have to set rents above guideline and to keep the proceeds to spend locally is being gradually eroded during the period of rent restructuring.

It could be argued that the recent changes to the housing subsidy system have created a situation where Council's should find that their housing revenue accounts are sustainable. Councils will receive management and maintenance allowances that are considered to be set at realistic levels. The Major Repairs Allowance is set at a level that is supposed to fund the ongoing major repairs that will be required by authorities that are able to achieve the decent homes standard by 2010. As a result it could be expected that Councils that can achieve the decent homes standard by 2010 should be able to sustain the housing revenue account in the long term on the basis of the housing subsidy system that has been established.

Many authorities argue, though that management and maintenance allowances are still insufficient to fund the management and maintenance budgets that are required. Many Councils also consider that the government's plans for real terms increases in management and maintenance allowances are insufficient to fund the real terms inflation that they are experiencing in management and maintenance costs.

Similarly, the Major Repairs Allowance that was originally intended to fund all major repairs is now seen by many as insufficient. Stock condition surveys are showing that the need to spend on major repairs is greater than the major repairs allowance. At the same time, the major repairs allowance is being increased by less than inflation while building costs are increasing more rapidly. Many authorities calculate that this causes an increasing gap between the need to spend on major repairs and the resources that are provided thorough the major repairs allowance.

The housing subsidy system means that in theory there is no 'headroom' for making revenue contributions to capital outlay or to finance prudential borrowing.

Recent determinations have increased the total amount of 'negative subsidy' taken out of housing revenue accounts by the government. The 2008/09 determination has made changes to the calculation of guideline rents, management and maintenance allowances and the major repairs allowance. It has also abolished the rental constraint allowance. These measures have had the effect of providing the London Boroughs, in particular, with a particularly adverse settlement.

The subsidy system is still criticised for complexity, especially the inter relationship between limit, target, guideline and actual rents; and explaining the subsidy system to tenants and members. There are proposals to abolish the housing subsidy system that are under consideration by ministers.

In December 2007, Yvette Cooper MP, Minister of Housing announced a government review of the housing revenue account system. She said:

"I am today announcing a review of the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system to be led jointly by officials in my department and in HM Treasury, reporting to ministers in both departments.

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"In the housing green paper… we said that we wanted to examine the case for change to the redistributive Housing Revenue Account subsidy system. The purpose of the review is to ensure that we have a sustainable, long term system for financing council housing and that this system is consistent with wider housing policy, including the establishment of a regulator of social housing.

"The review will build on the work of the pilots we have conducted with six local authorities which looked at the costs and benefits of councils operating outside the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system. It will consider evidence about the need to spend on management, maintenance and repairs. It will consider rent policy, including the relationship between council rents and rents set by other social housing providers. It will also consider how the self-financing model developed in the pilot exercise would fit with the aims of the review and, if it is consistent with these, how it could be implemented. And it will consider whether the rules which govern the operation of the HRA need to be changed in order to fit with a new system of financing.

"The review will make its final report in spring 2009, setting out a way forward for the subsidy system, rents policy across all social housing, and spending needs for council housing."

It therefore appears that any changes to the housing revenue account subsidy system may not be made until 2010.

It appears to me that the main issues are:

- Should there be a redistributive system that moves money in or out of housing revenue accounts nationally and moves money between housing revenue accounts?
- If we accept that there should be a redistributive system:
    - Should central government be a net contributor or a net receiver of funds?
    - How should the level of funding received/lost by individual authorities be calculated?
    - How should major repairs allowance be calculated and managed?
- Should local authorities be free to set rents at levels of their choosing to provide either revenue or capital resources to achieve locally determined standards?

The argument in England about housing subsidy appears to accept a continued need for a redistributive system. The proposal is that rather than achieving this through an annual housing subsidy payment it would be achieved through making one-off payments that result in a restructuring of debt. The idea that tenants in all authorities should have levels of rents and services determined in a consistent way seems to be universally accepted in England and it is difficult to see how this could be achieved without some form of redistributive system. Do we want to challenge this assumption?

In Scotland there is no housing subsidy but there is a Housing Support Grant that is designed to assist authorities with capital financing costs in specific situations. In practice very few receive this grant and only the Shetlands receive any significant amount (£2.1million). However, housing revenue accounts do not make a contribution to central funds. It may be worth mentioning Scotland as an alternative model. However, adoption of this model in England would seriously reduce the resources available in positive subsidy authorities – principally in Inner London and increase the resources available in negative subsidy authorities – principally in the East, South and West. It would involve acknowledging that there would be inconsistencies in services in different places.

It is easy to argue that government should not 'tax' tenants through the subsidy system. However, if the system is based on the idea that councils' resources are adjusted to the level of their assessed need and this means negative subsidy what is the problem? The argument against negative subsidy therefore needs to include a case that the total resources allowed to housing revenue accounts are insufficient. It therefore becomes an argument for increased resources that could only be provided at the expense of other budgets.

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A fair question might then be what other budgets we would like to reduce to allow negative subsidy to be eliminated! (It is of course tempting to suggest that money spent on Northern Rock could have been better spent on social housing).

If we accept that there should be a redistribution of resources between authorities it follows that there needs to be an assessment of relative need to spend against relative rent receipts. This implies some form of subsidy system. The argument then becomes one of how to calculate relative need to spend and this is an argument with which we have become familiar since 1989. The system could be simplified, as it is in Wales, but the principles of the system and perceived injustices would remain.

In addition to the argument that the major repairs allowance is often found to be inadequate in comparison with the need to spend as identified in stock condition surveys, there is an argument that many authorities do not receive major repairs allowance anyway. This is because they are in negative subsidy and are effectively obliged to fund major repairs by revenue contributions rather than through receiving an allowance. This is increasingly becoming the case.

In Wales, the major repairs allowance is a capital grant and it may be an option to make it a capital grant in England also. This would mean that authorities would actually receive the cash. However, the fact that the major repairs allowance is a capital grant does not stop the Welsh Assembly Government from taking money out of housing revenue accounts through negative subsidy. The principle of negative subsidy at a national level would remain to be tackled.

The argument about borrowing against capital values is less clear. It is possible to borrow against capital values, but there is still a need to find a revenue stream to meet interest payments. If a revenue stream can be found then prudential borrowing is possible whether or not borrowing against capital values is permitted.

Rent policy therefore appears to be the issue. Should a local authority be able to raise rents to fund either prudential borrowing or revenue contributions to enable it to resource the level of capital expenditure that is shown to be necessary by the stock condition survey or is needed to meet tenant aspirations? This option would involve ending the rent restructuring policy and rent rebate subsidy limitation. In Scotland, there is neither a national rent policy nor a housing subsidy system so local authorities do take their own decisions on rents and, in practice, are making real increases in rents to fund investment to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. This has two implications for the United Kingdom finances. First, most of the cost of the additional rents falls on the Department for Work & Pensions through Housing Benefit subsidy. Second, the borrowing counts against the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement. The government could argue that this would cause them to have to divert resources away from other services.

My overall conclusion is that the bottom line is what matters rather than the detail. All the options that are put forward that would achieve anything are either proposals to redistribute money between authorities, or proposals to increase the total resources available to housing revenue accounts. If government is not prepared to move on the latter all that remains is a depressing argument about the former and continuing decline. Perhaps we need to recognise that there is insufficient funding for council housing and the government should put more money in (or take less money out). The complexities of the current system create a ‘fog’ that hides this central problem.

The 2008 series of regional seminars ‘All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance’ is being held at various venues in England until May 2008. Details can be found on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/housingfinancecourse.asp

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Achieving Efficiencies and Value for Money in theory and in Copeland

As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review the government has concluded that all public sector organisations will need to make significant efficiency gains if their objectives are to be achieved within constrained budgets. They have therefore set a target of at least 3% cashable efficiency gains a year. The intention is to maximise the resources available to improve frontline services and fund new priorities. The government suggests that one way of making efficiency gains is to use e-technology to increase the efficiency of staff. They are also seeking the release of £30billion from fixed asset disposals between 2004/05 and 2010/11.

It is important to note the difference between 'efficiency gains' and 'savings'. 'Savings' are something with which most people in local authorities will be familiar. If you spend less on a service you have made a 'saving' regardless of the effect that the 'saving' has had on the level of service. 'Efficiency' and 'Value for Money' is about increasing the relationship between outputs/outcomes and costs/inputs. So, if you make a 'saving' and maintain the level of service you have become more efficient and if you spend the same and provide a better service you have also become more efficient. In the first example you have a 'cashable efficiency gain' and in the second instance you have a 'non-cashable efficiency gain'.

The audit commission considers that 'value for money' has three elements: Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness:

'Economy' is about how much you spend. If you write housing strategies and you want to achieve maximum 'economy' you would simply employ fewer people and spend less. However, this would make it more difficult to produce a good housing strategy.

'Efficiency' is about what outputs you achieve in relation to your inputs. If the same team of housing strategists carry out more research and produce a better strategy they could be said to have become more 'efficient'. One way of judging this could be the extent to which the housing strategies meet the 'fit for purpose' criteria.

'Effectiveness' is about whether the outputs (housing strategies) achieve the desired outcomes. This could be judged by looking at whether the housing needs that have been identified are being addressed. For example, is more affordable housing being made available, are there fewer homeless people, is the condition of local authority, housing association and private stock being improved and are tenants and residents more satisfied with life in their neighbourhoods?

'Value for Money' is about addressing economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The audit commission has defined 'excellence' in Value for Money as:

"A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users, is highly cost-effective and fully contributes to the achievement of wider outcomes for the community."

In my view the key to success in delivering 'value for money' is to focus on what represents 'value for money' for the customer rather than on what represents 'value for money' for the organisation. This means finding out what the customers' needs and wishes are and considering how to provide products that are relevant to addressing those needs and wishes, are of a high quality and are delivered as cost effectively as possible. Only when this has been established should attention be turned to considering how the organisation should organise itself and how it should purchase the goods and services that it requires. If this is done without a prior consideration of 'value for money' for customers there is a danger that it simply becomes a sterile exercise in trying to reduce staff numbers or to buy goods and services more cheaply. The consideration of 'value for money' for customers is likely to result in a change in the nature and level of services provided and the way in which they are delivered.

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Having done this attention should be turned to how to deliver relevant, quality services in a cost effective manner. In the case of most public services most costs are staff costs and there is therefore a need to recognise that 'value for money' strategy will usually involve considering human resource issues. There are perhaps three main aspects to this:

First, embedding a 'value for money' culture. The recent audit commission study of 'value for money' in housing associations – 'better buys' – found that developing the right culture among staff is more important in securing 'value for money' gains than selecting the right procurement options. All staff need to see 'value for money' as part of their own role rather than something that senior management will initiate. This also means that management should welcome suggestions from their staff to improve 'value for money'.

Second, 'value for money' should be seen as more than finding ways of procuring goods more cheaply. If staff costs are the major cost then 'time management', 'performance management' and investment in staff through staff development and training are critical to achieving 'value for money'.

Third, it must be recognised that in many cases improved 'value for money' will result in fewer staff being required in some areas and that sensitive human resources issues will therefore arise. This has been the case, for example, at Chorley Borough Council where the 'value for money' strategy has resulted in the loss of 100 staff. Donna Hall, Chief Executive of Chorley Borough Council is quoted in the 'Local Government Chronicle' as saying:

"The vast majority of local authorities' budgets are staff costs and you have to get that down. You can tinker round the edges, but at the end of the day, you have to take people out of the organisation… People know that in any organisation, there are people that are underperforming… If they did not have the skills and the capabilities that we needed, they were made redundant."

However, it is also important as part of a 'value for money' strategy to strengthen priority services and this can involve increasing staff numbers.

An example of this approach to 'value for money' is that which I took as Finance Director of Copeland Borough Council. The Finance Department provided accountancy, audit, exchequer, revenues and benefits services. Upon my appointment I consulted internal and external customers on their future needs and their current experience of the services that they received and also considered evidence on costs, performance and customer satisfaction. Having done this I shared the evidence that I had gathered with my staff, elected Members and the Chief Officer Management Team and developed a 'value for money strategy'.

I found that the accountancy section was well regarded and cost effective but considered to be 'remote' by internal customers including Directors and Business Unit Managers. I therefore created small devolved accountancy teams in each of the Council's three main departments headed by an accountant with dual responsibility to myself and the service director. This led to an improvement in the service provided by the accountants who were able to make a more significant contribution to the success of the services that they supported.

The Revenues service was found to be a high cost service in relation to that of similar authorities with a relatively low level of performance. I therefore reduced the cost of the service, principally by deleting some middle management posts and ending the use of temporary staff. Clear targets were set for the collection of revenues and procedures clearly documented. Significant savings were achieved that were used to fund service developments in other areas of the department and to provide a net saving to the authority to invest in improvements in other 'front line' services. Improved performance in Council Tax collection also enabled the authority to reduce its share of Council Tax in two consecutive years.

The Exchequer service was found to be well regarded, low cost and performed well so no significant changes were made.

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The Benefits service provided a poor service. For example, very few claims were settled within the target of fourteen days. It was also seen as being remote from its customers being based centrally in a comparatively rural area (some claimants had a round trip of over seventy miles to see a benefits officer!) and there were concerns about low levels of benefit claims and the effectiveness of work in handling fraud and overpayments. However, expenditure on benefits administration was low. I therefore increased the numbers of staff employed, devolved benefits officers into four existing neighbourhood offices and one new neighbourhood office, appointed a Fraud Officer and an Overpayments Officer, launched a benefits take up campaign and set targets for the turn-around of claims. Performance, customer satisfaction and the take-up of benefits increased, while the savings achieved by the Fraud Officer and Overpayments Officer exceeded the cost of their salaries. The increased take up of benefits obviously benefited the claimants concerned but also brought additional resources into an area of economic and social deprivation.

The Internal Audit section was part of the accountancy team and small but had potential. I therefore took it out of the accountancy team and established it as a separate Business Unit with the Head of Audit having the enhanced status of a Business Unit Manager. I created a new post of 'Value for Money Auditor' following which the internal audit service was able to propose 'value for money' gains that exceeded its own costs. With the advent of 'Best Value' the service was able to expand its remit to address performance management and continuous improvement. I also strengthened the central accountancy team with the appointment of a Technical Accountant who assisted me with lobbying for increased resources for the authority with significant success. Our capital programme expanded to over £20million a year.

This 'value for money' strategy therefore involved a focus on what the internal and external customers required and how to deliver that, investment of additional resources in improving services and in 'back office' services that could contribute to the 'value for money' agenda, analysis of costs and performance and achieving savings that contributed to the development of other 'front line' services. However, it was focused on delivering relevant, quality services at an appropriate cost rather than simply on achieving savings.

However, it was important to gain staff commitment to the strategy. Some middle managers in the department were opposed to this approach and difficult to 'win over'. The trade unions were opposed to this approach and I well remember them demonstrating outside the Council offices with placards reading 'No to Customer Care'. Some of the Members were also opposed to this approach. However, I was lucky to have the support of the then Chief Executive and Leader of the Council and the 'value for money' strategy was implemented.

Gaining acceptance of the changes among the staff was difficult. A lot of effort was put into staff consultation, staff training, improving staff development schemes and staff briefing. Some staff, including managers, left the department feeling that a customer-centred and 'value for money' approach was not something that they could support. However, others welcomed the new approach and at an away day for the departmental management team it was decided (not at my suggestion!) to adopt an objective of being the 'best finance department in England' – an ambition that would not even have been considered a few years before!

'AWICS' is assisting local authorities with the development of value for money strategies and with training staff in 'value for money' issues. It is being increasingly recognised that there is a need to 'embed' 'value for money' throughout organisations through changing the culture. The Audit Commission has found that this is even more important than selecting appropriate methods of procurement.

We are also holding a series of regional seminars on 'Achieving Efficiencies and Value for Money in Social Housing'. The speakers are Adrian Waite, Stephen Harriott and Janet Williams of the Audit Commission. Further details can be found on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/housingvfmcourse.asp .

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Scottish Local Authority Housing Finance

Councils with housing stock are obliged to maintain a ring-fenced housing revenue account that is used to record all income and expenditure with reference to providing the housing and other services to tenants. The housing revenue account is almost entirely funded from rents with the main items of expenditure being management, maintenance and capital financing.

The Scottish Government provides Housing Support Grant. However, this is significant in the case of only two authorities with high levels of debt.

In recent years Councils have increased their expenditure by a greater proportion than their rents – principally to fund investment to achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. As a result housing revenue account balances have diminished rather than increased. There are substantial variations between expenditure on management and maintenance between authorities.

Local authorities have discretion to set rent levels within a framework based on affordability, costs and comparability with other social landlords. In practice there are significant differences in the rents set by different authorities. There are also significant differences in the amount of rent lost through voids and bad debts between authorities.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in capital expenditure on council housing stock as Councils seek to achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. Much of this increase has been funded through increased borrowing, a trend that was accelerated in 2006/07 when the level of capital receipts declined.

Right to buy sales provide considerable capital receipts. However, Right to buy has depleted the social housing stock, increasing restrictions are being placed around the scheme and there has been a recent reduction in the level of capital receipts.

The level of Councils' debt on council housing is increasing, but there are significant differences in the level of debt between authorities.

The Scottish Housing Quality Standard is seen by many as the cornerstone of the Scottish Government's policy on social housing. It was introduced by the former Labour-Liberal Democrat administration but has been continued by the present Scottish Nationalist administration.

The prudential system of borrowing has been in place since 2004 and allows authorities to borrow as much as they think appropriate with the only constraint being the amount of borrowing that they can afford. This is calculated under the code of practice by authorities identifying 'prudential indicators' to assess the level of borrowing that is affordable.

The prudential system of borrowing is very significant in Scotland in that it allows local authorities to borrow as much as necessary to achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, or indeed any other standard that may be locally determined. However, the cost of this borrowing must be borne through rents. This is causing concerns that the effect of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and prudential borrowing may be to increase rents to above affordable levels with consequences for affordability and the United Kingdom housing benefit budget.

We are holding a seminar on 'All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance in Scotland' in Edinburgh on 15th May 2008. This is an introduction and overview of this complex subject that is designed for people who are not financial experts. Further details can be found on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/housingfinancecoursescotland.asp

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National Awards for Local Government 2008: Congratulations to Fenland and Warrington

Congratulations to 'AWICS' clients who have been recognised in the Local Government Chronicle National Awards for Local Government 2008.

Fenland District Council was short-listed for 'Council of the Year', 'Most Improved Council of the Year', 'Health and Wellbeing Award', 'Regeneration Award' and 'Transformational Government Award'. It has been on a 'transformational journey' from being 'poor' in 2002 to being 'excellent' in 2007 – jumping two places from 'fair' to 'excellent' in that year. In 2006/07 the Audit Commission also verified that it was the most improved Council in England with 72% of Best Value Performance Indicators improving compared with a district council average of 48%. The Council has received 31 awards and commendations during the past year.

The Council has also successfully delivered several major change projects including the opening of a unique network of customer service centres, a £47million regeneration project in Wisbech and the transfer of its 4,800 council homes to Roddons Housing Association.

The award winning £47million Nene Waterfront development in Wisbech is transforming twenty acres of derelict and dangerous land that has been dormant for more than twenty years. The development will create at least 150 new jobs, 300 new homes, a business and conference centre as well as additional boat moorings and a boat lift. The project is part of the Council's vision to turn Wisbech into a vibrant regional centre.

The Council takes pride in delivering innovative projects to ensure that the Gypsy and Traveller community lead healthy lives. With many towns and villages being so remote getting the message across is a challenge. Methods used include the diversity forum, traveller fairs and welcome packs. Through these, it gives individuals information to help themselves with access to health care, housing, schools and amenities.

The Council has also transformed the way that it delivers its benefits services through the innovative use of technology. This has enabled the Council to join up its back office with its front facing one-stop shops, business reception and telephone contact centre through investing in customer relationship management. The Council has become the fifth best in England for the speed of benefits processing. Customer satisfaction increased from 78% in 2003/04 to 88% in 2007/08.

'AWICS' was appointed as Independent Tenants' Advisor for the housing stock options appraisal in 2004 and was subsequently re-appointed for the housing stock transfer that was completed in November 2007.

Warrington Borough Council was short-listed for the 'Efficiency and Modernisation Award'. The Council is making its vision 'to be an outstanding town in the northwest with opportunities for all' into a reality. Although growth in resources has been relatively low, the Council's budget is still significant.

At the heart of delivering both the efficiencies programme and redirecting resources to front-line services is the development of a business culture. Business information has been used to develop a framework to allow better choice on resource deployment and in key areas backed by a transformation programme on using procurement, deploying assets and providing business support services. Warrington Borough Council is ensuring that key resources are deployed to the front-line.

'AWICS' was appointed to carry out a 'health check' on the Housing Revenue Account in 2006 and was subsequently appointed to assist with the preparation of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

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IPSM Negotiates Discounts for its Members

The Institute of Public Sector Management (IPSM) has negotiated discounts for its individual members at 'AWICS' regional seminars and on 'AWICS' publications. Individual Members of IPSM can now claim a 10% discount on attendance at an 'AWICS' regional seminar or the purchase of an 'AWICS' publication.

Our 2008 programme of regional seminars is as follows:

- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – February to July 2008)
- Achieving Efficiencies and Value for Money in Social Housing (March to May 2008)
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – April to July 2008)
- All You Want to Know about Housing Association Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – March to July 2008)
- Developments in Local Authority Housing Finance in England (September to October 2008)

Details are on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/index.asp

The usual fee is £250 plus VAT per delegate in London or £220 plus VAT per delegate at other venues so the discount is worth at least £22 a seminar. This represents excellent value for money.

Full membership of IPSM costs £66 a year, so a member who attends three 'AWICS' regional seminars in a year will recoup their entire membership fee!

'AWICS' current publications are as follows:

- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Finance
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (England)
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (Scotland)
- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (Wales)
- All You Want to Know about Housing Association Finance
- Sustainable Housing Business Plans and the Efficiency Agenda
- Arms Length Management Organisations: Freedoms, Flexibilities and the Future
- Comprehensive Spending Review 2007: Implications for Local Government and Housing
- Achieving Efficiencies and Value for Money in Social Housing
- Developments in Social Housing Finance in Scotland – The Implications of the Green Paper

Details are on our website at: www.awics.co.uk/publications.asp

The usual price is either £25 or £30 a book, plus £2.95 postage and packing. The discount that is available to IPSM members is therefore either £2.50 or £3.00.

The Institute of Public Sector Management is the only membership body exclusively dedicated to managers working in the Public, Voluntary and Not-for-profit Sectors.

They have a diverse membership representing all areas of society and the public sector. Individual members already have access to a broad network, sharing knowledge, skills and experience, helping all members to deliver better public services. They now have discounted access to 'AWICS' regional seminars and publications.

More information about the Institute of Public Sector Management can be found on their website at: www.ipsm.org.uk

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Services on offer!

'AWICS' offers a wide range of management consultancy and training courses in management and financial topics. These include:
• Regional Seminars
• In-House Training
• Management Consultancy (including Business and Best Value Reviews, Advice on Procurement, Housing Finance, Housing Stock Options Appraisals, Housing Association finance, Public Authority accounting, Advice to voluntary bodies and Performance Management)
• Independent Tenants' Advice

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

'AWICS' 2008 Programme of Regional Seminars

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

- All You Want to Know about Local Authority Housing Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – February to July 2008)
- Achieving Efficiencies and Value for Money in Social Housing (March to May 2008)
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- All You Want to Know about Housing Association Finance (separate English, Scottish and Welsh versions – March to July 2008)
- Developments in Local Authority Housing Finance in England (September to October 2008)

Details will be placed on our website: www.awics.co.uk/regionalseminars/index.asp

Opportunities with 'AWICS'

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

We are especially interested in appointing Associate consultants with expertise in the following fields:
• Local Government Finance
• Housing Management
• Arms Length Management Organisations
• National Health Service Finance
• Finance of Voluntary Bodies

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

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

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