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Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited

Briefing Paper

Local Government Finance Settlement for England 2014/15

January 2014

Introduction

The local government financial settlement for England for 2014/15 was announced as expected on 18th December 2013. Revenue Support Grant is being reduced by 9.4% on average in 2014/15 with further reductions in 2015/16 taking the total reduction to 13.2%. The government calculates that this will lead to an average reduction in spending power (taking account of other sources of income in local government) of 2.9% in 2014/15 and 1.8% in 2015/16. Last year the government stated that this year's reduction in spending power for local authorities would be 1.7%. The largest reductions in spending power at 6.9% in 2014/15 are for Chesterfield Borough Council and East Lindsey District Council; with reductions generally being greatest in London, Metropolitan and urban areas.

The Secretary of State has suggested that local authorities can manage with these reduced resources by 'cutting waste and making sensible savings'. However, everyone I know who is involved in local government is agreed that the local government financial settlement will force councils to make significant reductions in front-line services and that some may even find their financial viability threatened.

Communities Minister Brandon Lewis said this settlement is 'fair to all parts of the country' but Labour said services would suffer and some councils could be stretched to 'breaking point'.

The draft local government financial settlement is currently out for consultation with a deadline for responses of 15th January 2014. However, past experience under successive governments suggests that whatever representations are received the final settlement will not differ significantly from the draft settlement.

This briefing paper summarises the local government financial settlement and reactions to it in the sector and provides some commentary.

Details of the Settlement

The total reduction in council spending power – a calculation of both government grants and council tax revenue – will be nearly £1.7billion in 2014/15. This equates to a 2.9% average reduction in funding, according to the provisional local government finance settlement.

Greater reductions are imposed on London authorities – down 4.5% on average – and metropolitan districts, reduced by 4.2%. Funding for cities will also see greater than average falls. Spending power is to be cut 5.5% for Liverpool, 5.3% for Birmingham and 5% for Manchester.

Unit 3, Shire Hall, The Sands, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6XN.
Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk

Managing Director: Adrian Waite MA CPFA CIHM FInstLM
Registered Address as above. Company Number: 3713554. VAT Registration Number: 721 9669 13

The largest cut for individual authorities is 6.9% for Chesterfield in Derbyshire and East Lindsey in Lincolnshire. A total of 38 authorities have either received a flat settlement, or will receive an increase in spending power.

Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government said:

"The coalition Government has tried to be fair to every part of the country – north and south, rural and urban, metropolitan and shire.

"Unlike the old funding system, which encouraged councils to talk down their local areas to win more funding, the decentralisation of local government finance now puts councils in the driving seat, rewarding them for supporting local enterprise, building more homes and backing local jobs.

"This year, councils should continue to focus on cutting waste and making sensible savings to protect frontline services and keep council tax down."

The local government finance settlement has been analysed by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy. They have calculated that the amount of central government funding for local authorities in England is to fall by 9.4% in 2014/15 – three times the reduction in spending power announced by ministers.

This total is made up of baseline funding set by the Department for Communities & Local Government as part of business rates localisation and each authority's revenue support grant allocation. This is broadly similar to the old formula grant funding measure, replaced when business rates retention was introduced in April 2013.

The analysis of the figures also found that the reduction in central funding would be above average in both metropolitan areas (10%) and shires (9.5%) in 2014/15, but the cut to authorities in London was smaller (8.5%).

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy also highlighted that there would be greater reductions in central government support in 2015/16. According to illustrative 2015/16 settlement funding assessment figures, dedicated Department for Communities & Local Government support for councils in England will fall by 13.2%. This is made up of an 11.4% decrease in London, a 13.4% decrease in shire areas and a 14.3% decrease in metropolitan areas.

Rob Whiteman, Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy said that the Department for Communities & Local Government's funding announcement was:

"Stronger on spin and misleading presentation than the technically sound explanation that councils and the public would expect… as these figures demonstrate this week's statement on the local government settlement was by any usual standards an unfortunately opaque announcement.

"It demonstrates yet again how desperately we need to take the see-saw of party politics out of the allocation of funding and instead base it upon objectivity, transparency and predictability."

Details of the settlement are on the government's website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/provisional-local-government-finance-settlement-england-2014-to-2015

Technical Details

The Government published the illustrative 2014/15 Local Government Finance Report in February 2013, and consulted on technical proposals for 2014/15 and 2015/16 in July 2013. The Government also made two announcements in 2013 that affect the 2014/15 settlement:

- At the Budget that a reduction of 1% would be made from the local government spending control total.
- At the Autumn Statement that the small business non-domestic rating multiplier for 2014/15 would be capped at 2%.

The government has decided to achieve the 1% reduction announced at Budget 2013 by protecting council tax freeze funding but scaling back all other allocations; and to uprate each authority's baseline funding level, tariff or top up in line with the 2% small business rates multiplier.

The Government has considered responses to the technical consultation and has made changes to the proposals for 2014/15 to:

- Hold back £120million for the rates retention safety net and to offset this in 2014/15 with a £50million holdback using funding previously held back for capitalisation
- Remove the remaining £50million holdback for capitalisation and return the balance to authorities in proportion to their settlement funding assessment, after meeting the cost of additional funding for rural authorities and the cap on spending power reductions
- Reduce the holdback to fund the full New Homes Bonus for local councils from £800million to £700million
- Roll into the settlement the £174million council tax freeze funding for 2013/14, as a separate element, from 2014/15, rather than from 2015/16
- Roll into the settlement additional funding for rural authorities of £9.5million

To provide greater certainty for authorities and to help them plan for the transformation of their services, the government has published illustrative 2015/16 allocations alongside the 2014/15 settlement. These are subject to further change and the government will consult on the provisional 2015/16 settlement in autumn 2014. The illustrative 2015/16 settlement has been prepared on the basis of the following proposals to:

- Reduce the holdback to fund the full New Homes Bonus for local councils from £1.1billion to £1.0billion
- Holdback £50million for the rates retention safety net (from upper and lower tier and fire and rescue elements only, with a lower contribution from fire)
- Achieve the reduction announced at Spending Round 2013 by scaling back elements within Revenue Support Grant at differential rates by:
    - Protecting grants rolled into the start-up funding assessment in April 2013 from the full 10% reduction by extending the trajectories set in the 2010 spending round
    - Ensuring that authorities that froze council tax continue to be compensated
    - Continuing to protect the very small overall funding allocation to the Isles of Scilly
    - Making a small transfer out to cover lost carbon reduction revenue from authorities falling out of that scheme

Council Tax

For the past three years, councils have been offered additional funding on condition that they 'froze' Council Tax while government has also provided that councils cannot increase their council tax by any more than 2% without putting the matter to a referendum.

However, a growing number of local authorities (including many that are under Conservative control) are concluding that an increase in council tax will be necessary in 2014/15 to ensure their continued financial viability.

In the June 2013 spending review, Chancellor George Osborne announced that the freeze on council tax in England that was due to come to an end in April 2014 would be extended by two years.

Following the announcement of the 2014/15 settlement, Eric Pickles said:

"Opinion polling suggests that satisfaction with local government is either constant or improved compared to 2010, helped by the fact that council tax bills have been cut by 10% in real terms."

Brandon Lewis said:

"We expect local authorities to protect taxpayers and help bear down on the cost of living… That is why we have provided up to £550million of extra funding to local authorities so they can freeze council tax for the next two years. This means we have provided an unprecedented five years of freeze funding worth potentially up to £1,100 for an average Band D taxpayer over the lifetime of Parliament.

"From April 2014, funding for 2011 to 2012 and 2013 to 2014 freezes is now in the main local government settlement total for future years. I can also announce that the Secretary of State has agreed with the Chancellor that the funding for the next two freeze years will also be built into the spending review baseline. We hope this will give maximum possible certainty for councils that the extra funding for freezing Council Tax will remain available, and there will not be a 'cliff edge' effect from the freeze grant disappearing in due course. We have done our part – we now expect councils to do theirs in helping hard-working people with the cost of living.

"We will announce the Council Tax referendum threshold principles separately in the New Year. We are particularly open to representations suggesting that some lower threshold be applied to all or some categories of authorities, given the strong need to protect taxpayers wherever possible from unreasonable increases in bills, and given next year's elections on 22 May across the country allow for referendums to be held at minimal cost. We should trust the people.

"The final referendum principles will then be subject to the approval of the House of Commons. In addition, subject to approval by Parliament of the Local Audit and Accountability Bill, which is currently before Parliament, the principles will include levies and will therefore be based on the level of Band D Council Tax. This will mean the principle will relate to the actual increase which appears on people's bills – again reducing costs for taxpayers."

The threshold at which authorities will need to hold a local referendum if they choose to increase council tax instead of accept the freeze grant would be published in the New Year. This was set at 2% last year, but Eric Pickles said that ministers were:

"Particularly open to representations suggesting that some lower threshold be applied to councils, given the strong need to protect taxpayers wherever possible from unreasonable increases in bills".

As part of the 2014/15 settlement the government has tried to reassure councils that the money they are offered to freeze council tax won't just be for twelve months at a time and that they won't face a 'cliff edge' in the years ahead. From April, grants for the previous freezes in 2011/12 and 2013/14 will also be included in the funding settlement total for future years, and the next two years of freeze funding will also form part of the baseline. The Department for Communities and Local Government said this would give councils the maximum possible certainty of future funding.

However, it is unlikely that this will be enough to avoid widespread increases in council tax in 2014/15.

The government's approach to council tax is causing widespread concern in the sector. Despite protesting its support for 'localism' the government is preventing democratically elected local authorities from using their judgement about levels of council tax while not applying the same constraints to centrally determined taxation or to the charges set by public or private corporations. It would be interesting to see what would happen if energy companies were prevented from raising their prices unless they could gain the approval of the public in a referendum!

It appears inconsistent for the government to allow councils to increase council tax by 2% without holding a referendum and then to criticise those that increase council tax by slightly under 2%.

As Council Tax is now effectively determined by central government but remains set at different levels in different local authority areas, and as it is based on outdated valuations the logic for continuing with the tax in its present form may be called into question. However, as Adam Smith pointed out as early as the eighteenth century, property taxes are easy to collect, difficult to avoid and are paid by people who obviously have assets; so the continuation of some form of council tax would appear likely.

Council Tax Support and Parish Councils

Brandon Lewis stated that:

"We have also set out previously that there is some £3.3 billion in the settlement this year for Council Tax support schemes. There is an element within this national pot that is there specifically to reflect reductions in the parish tax base. We have not separately identified the money because it is not ring-fenced and as caseloads change and schemes evolve, the amount that different parishes need will change. It would be wrong to try to manage that centrally. But we have been clear that we expect billing authorities to carry on passing on support to town councils and parishes to help mitigate any reduction in their tax base due to the local Council Tax support scheme."

Better Use of Resources

In his written statement, Brandon Lewis stated that:

"The Autumn Statement recognised that the local government sector has risen to the challenge of reducing the budget deficit left by the last administration. Indeed, opinion polling suggests that satisfaction with local government is either constant or improved compared to 2010, despite the need for councils to make savings to tackle that deficit.

"The Autumn Statement ensured that the local government budget is protected next year so that councils can deliver a Council Tax freeze. Councils now have more stability and certainty to plan budgets and move ahead with transforming local services and ongoing efficiency. English local government accounts for £1 of every £4 spent on public services, and is expected to spend some £117billion in 2013 to 2014. So the settlement that we are proposing recognises the responsibility of local government to find sensible savings and make better use of its resources. This settlement marks the second year of business rates retention, and leaves councils with considerable total spending power, with an overall reduction, excluding the Greater London Authority, for next year of just 2.9%. We expect the average spending power per dwelling to be some £2,089.

"Alongside this we have increased the protection that the safety net will offer, so that no council will face a loss of more than 6.9% in their spending power in 2014 to 2015, a higher level of protection than we offered both last year and the year before. We have achieved this by increasing the amount we have made available to protect councils through the Efficiency Support Grant, now worth some £9.4million in 2014 to 2015. But we will expect the councils in receipt of that funding – in line with the efficiencies that we are asking all councils to deliver – to improve services. It is unfair on the rest of local government to expect them to subsidise other councils' failure to modernise public services. In order to further facilitate effective budget planning, we are also making available illustrative figures for 2015 to 2016, and we announced in June that we will be making £3.8billion worth of pooled budgets available between health and social care. This is the largest ever financial incentive for councils and NHS organisations to jointly plan and deliver joined up services."

Eric Pickles stated that:

"This year, councils should continue to focus on cutting waste and making sensible savings to protect frontline services and keep council tax down."

The Department for Communities & Local Government also highlighted the 'significant scope' for councils to merge back-office services, improve procurement and tackle £2.4billion of local fraud to mitigate the impact of reductions.

In 2013 the government published its practical guide of sensible savings, called 'Fifty ways to save'. Further to this, Eric Pickles believes there is still significant scope for councils to make savings by:

- Merging back office services or do more joint working
- Getting more for less from their £60billion a year procurement budget
- Tackling the £2.4billion of local fraud
- Reducing the £2billion lost in Council Tax arrears
- Using their £19billion of reserves and £2.3billion of surplus property assets to keep Council Tax down and modernise public services.

Everyone who I have spoken to in the local government sector is highly sceptical about whether the reductions in budgets that are required can be made solely by making efficiency gains and by reducing waste.

The Secretary of State's statements about reserves have also been controversial. During recent years councils have increased the level of their reserves on the grounds that it is prudent to increase reserves at a time of uncertainty and austerity. The Secretary of State argues that if reserves had not been increased the need for reductions in budgets would have been correspondingly lower. This is evidently true even if councils would not consider it prudent. However, what I find strange about the argument is that in increasing reserves councils are contributing to reducing public sector borrowing which is something that I would have expected ministers to applaud rather than to criticise.

Rural Areas

Brandon Lewis stated that:

"We accepted in 2013 to 2014 that, based on the available evidence, rural areas had been comparatively under-funded. We therefore made an adjustment to recognise the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas. We will be providing an Efficiency Support for Sparse Areas grant worth £9.5 million so that the most rural local authorities can continue to drive forward efficiencies in their area. This is an increase on the grant paid for this purpose in 2013 to 2014 and we intend that the grant will be rolled in to the settlement in 2014 to 2015, offering further protection for the most rural authorities."

Business Rate Retention and New Homes Bonus

The settlement marks the second year of business rates retention, where councils receive half of the growth in rates. Following this reform, councils now generate more than 70% of their income locally compared to just 56% under the old system.

Councils now benefit directly from local business growth. From 2013/14 councils are retaining up to half the revenue raised through business rates - some £11.5billion a year – and the annual growth on their share. They now have an incentive to support local businesses, and can reject the idea that they are wholly dependent on central government.

The provisional allocations of the New Homes Bonus were published on 16th December 2013. Final allocations will be published alongside the final settlement.

Brandon Lewis stated that:

"In 2013 to 2014, we introduced business rates retention which ensures that those councils who bring in jobs and business will be rewarded for backing local growth and local jobs. Similarly, the New Homes Bonus remunerates those councils who build more homes and bring empty properties back into use. The New Homes Bonus is worth more than £650 million this year and will be some £916 million in 2014 to 2015, as announced to the House on Monday. In response to consultation we have also reduced the amount that we proposed to set aside in the settlement to pay for New Homes Bonus allocations."

Education Funding

At the same time as the local government finance settlement was announced, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, announced that Local authorities in England are to share in an additional £2.35billion in capital funding over three years to help them create the extra school places that will be needed by 2017.

This follows the announcement by David Laws, Minister for Schools in September 2013 that the government was considering making long-term capital allocations to councils to help them serve the education needs of the growing number of school-age children.

In a written ministerial statement, Michael Gove said that longer-term allocations for new school places would give councils more certainty in their planning in the context of current and projected increases in pupil numbers. He said:

"The major investment I am announcing today will enable local authorities to make sure the there are enough school places for every child who needs one in the years to come.

"Extending the allocations to a three-year period will allow local authorities to plan strategically for the places they need.

"I have listened to the particular challenges faced by London, and therefore the methodology used to allocate funding for 2015-17 takes into account the high costs of building in the capital".

Michael Gove also confirmed that distribution of revenue funding via the Dedicated Schools Grant in 2014/15 would continue to be based on the 'spend plus' methodology. This gives each authority three spending blocks: for early years, for schools and for high needs.

The underlying schools budget will be kept at flat in cash per pupil terms for 2014/15 and, to protect councils with falling pupil numbers, no authority will lose more than 2% of budget in cash terms.

A minimum funding guarantee will also continue to apply to ensure no school sees more than a 1.5% per pupil reduction in 2014/15 budgets compared with both 2013/14 and before the Pupil Premium is added.

Revenue allocations to help local authorities to secure early learning places for two-year olds from lower income households were also confirmed. From September 2013, early learning became a statutory entitlement for 20% of two-years-olds across England, rising to 40% from September 2014. Michael Gove said that:

"To deliver this, the government is today allocating £760million to fund the extended programme in 2014/15".

The government provided details on capital investment to support universal free school meals for children in reception, year 1 and year 2. In the Autumn Statement, Chancellor George Osborne announced £150million of capital funding to improve school kitchen and dining facilities. Michael Gove said:

"The aim is to improve academic attainment and health eating, and save families money".

Peter John, London Councils' executive member for children's services, said the funding announcement for new school places was a 'welcome step in the right direction'. He added:

“Moving to a three-year funding cycle is also an important improvement to the funding arrangements as this will allow boroughs plan ahead, especially as the pupil pressure moves from primary to secondary”.

Implications for Stakeholders

The government has identified the following implications for stakeholders:

- Local residents should be seeing greater investment in local services as authorities increase their business rates. Their councils also need to make sensible savings to help freeze council tax and protect frontline services, and with Government investing in council tax freeze grant and service transformation residents can expect to see this.
- Businesses see no change in the way their business rate bills are calculated as a result of the new system, but now have a much greater incentive to work with local councils. The Autumn Statement set out a £1.1 billion package of business rates measures to encourage growth by capping the business rates RPI increase at 2% in 2014-15 for all businesses and extending the doubling of the Small Business Rate Relief to March 2015. A two-year business rates discount of £1000 for smaller retail premises will also come into effect from April 2014, and a new relief to help bring empty shops back into use is planned.
- Councils now have much greater incentive to grow businesses in their areas and much greater certainty about their future funding - allowing them to plan ahead, manage risk, budget for the long term and plan for worst case scenarios. There is also a safety net in the new business rates scheme in case things don't go as planned. They will also want to work more closely with the Valuation Office Agency to ensure that local firms are having their properties valued correctly and are paying the right amount of tax.

Reactions to the Settlement

The Local Government Association said that local authorities are continuing to face tough times but ministers had made some important concessions to alleviate the impact of the continuing budget squeeze. Their Chair, Sir Merrick Cockell (Conservative) said that local government would have had to make £20billion in savings and that the next two years would be ‘the toughest yet’ for those reliant on council services and that:

“(Councils) will continue to be at the sharp end of public sector spending cuts up to 2016.

"The money government gives to councils to run local services will fall by 8.5% over the next two years, but as a result of the Autumn Statement there will not be an additional reduction on top of this.

“By the end of this Parliament local government will have to have made £20billion worth of savings. Councils have so far largely restricted the impact of the cuts on their residents. They have worked hard to save those services that people most value and have protected spending on social care for children and the elderly, but even these areas are now facing reductions. That impact will only increase over the next two years.

"At a time when local authorities are contending with the biggest cuts in living memory, the introduction of the Better Care Fund and government's decision to reverse potentially costly changes to the New Homes Bonus will help the efforts of some local authorities in protecting vital everyday services, like caring for the elderly, from the worst impact of spending cuts."

Graeme McDonald, director of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, said that as some authorities would face cuts as high as 6.9% this could take them to 'breaking point' and said:

"This settlement reminds us that the financial challenge facing local government is immense."

Shadow communities secretary Hilary Benn (Labour), said:

"Why are the most disadvantaged communities, once again, being the hardest-hit?

"Tough times do indeed require tough decisions but, as this government has shown time and time again, from the bedroom tax to the top rate of tax to local government funding, it takes most from those who have least. It is unfair and it is unjust."

Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy, Rob Whiteman said the settlement was an:

"Unfortunate demonstration of how urgently we need an independent commission into local government funding.

"The opaque nature of figures and their presentation in the settlement demonstrates just how desperately we need to take the see-saw of party politics out of the allocation of funding and instead base it upon need.

'When government ministers compare such different councils as affluent Windsor and metropolitan Newcastle in an attempt to justify the "fairness" of the settlement it only serves to highlight how out of touch this process has become."

Conclusions

Despite local government being exempted from further budget reductions in the autumn statement, the draft local government finance settlement demonstrates the government's determination to make ongoing savings in local government budgets. This will inevitably lead to reductions in services, major re-organisation of local government and to the financial viability of some local authorities being called into question.

In the government's view, however, local authorities should be able to cope with the reduced funding and continue to freeze council tax if they tackle waste and become more efficient principally through improved procurement, shared services and increased use of the private sector.

The emphasis on freezing council tax can be seen as part of an agenda of limiting local autonomy and switching the balance of taxation away from direct taxes toward indirect taxes.

The savings introduced in the 2010 and 2013 spending reviews for local government were some of the largest cuts in public finance that have ever been made, and this financial austerity is expected to last until at least 2017.

This means that the financial challenges faced by local authorities are increasing and that increasingly radical approaches to local authority finance will be required. Studies have found that most local authorities will be able to manage their finances in 2014/15 but that some may cease to be financially viable from 2015/16 onwards. Austerity seems certain to continue in the local government sector, even if growth returns to the wider economy. This means that local authorities will have to develop their approaches to consulting residents and stakeholders about how to make reductions in budgets, priorities and the effects on services. Councils will need to be honest about the service levels and quality that they are able to provide and the options that are available to them.

This raises the question of whether all local authorities have the relevant strategic financial planning skills – both in the finance function and in other services. It is also critical that elected members have the appropriate skills, experience and support to appropriately scrutinise financial plans, budgets and savings programmes.

Local authorities will need to have a focus on generating additional revenue income.

Housing development is likely to become increasingly important for local authorities as it rises up the political agenda. The government has already announced £1billion of house building loans to encourage sites to become available and has allowed a modest £300million increase in the 'borrowing cap' on local authority housing revenue accounts. The opposition is attacking what they call 'stick in the mud councils' that do not release land for housing development. All parties will be looking for a positive approach to housing development from all local authorities.

Councils may have their reservations about the un-elected Local Enterprise Partnerships but government appears to prefer them to the local authorities as a vehicle for promoting economic development. For example, the Local Enterprise Partnerships are to receive a share of the New Homes Bonus. Local authorities will therefore need to develop close working relationships with the Local Enterprise Partnerships. Similarly, there is a need to develop partnerships with health authorities around the developing public health agenda and the relationship between health and social care services.

Adrian Waite
January 2014

All You Want to Know about Budgets and Management Accounts

March 2014

Do you think that a working knowledge of budgets and management accounts in the public sector would put you and your colleagues in a position of advantage?

Whether you are a non-Financial Manager, a Local Councillor or Board Member or are otherwise involved or interested in budgets and financial management in the public sector or even a member of a Finance Team, you could benefit from attending our seminar and workshop.

This session comes at a time when all public bodies are concerned to improve financial management in the face of austerity, including developing financial awareness among Members and Non-Financial Managers. If you are to be involved in preparing, approving or managing budgets this session is especially timely.

What the Session covers:

- How to understand budgets and accounts?
- How are Budgets put together?
- How are Budgets managed, controlled and monitored?
- What can Management Accounts tell us?
- What opportunities are there to use Budgets and Management accounts to improve services?

This seminar and workshop is designed for people who are not experts in finance, but who need to understand the basics of budgeting and management accounts and achieve an overview of what is going on. It is suitable for non-financial managers, councillors, board members and others who realise that an understanding of budgeting and financial management can place them at an advantage!

The seminar will refer principally to local authorities and housing associations but will also be relevant to other public sector bodies.

The seminar and workshop is accompanied by a very useful book that is designed to be used for reference after the session, entitled:

"All You Want to Know about Budgets and Management Accounts"

We believe in quality rather than quantity and so numbers at each session are limited to twenty people to permit the maximum possible interaction and participation.

Venue and Date:

London: Novotel Hotel, Waterloo – 12th March 2014

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Our mission statement is 'Independence, Integrity, Value'. We therefore provide support to clients from an independent standpoint that is designed to help the client to achieve their objectives. We are passionate about working with the utmost integrity. We believe that we offer the best value for money that is available today!

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