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In recent months we have seen the catalogue of data loss incidents grow to a level which, by common consent, is totally unacceptable. The list is long, with headlines being grabbed by the loss of 25m child benefit records in particular. Further incidents have been reported right across central government, including:

- the loss of 625,000 personal records by the Ministry of Defence;
- 45,000 people being affected by information losses by the Ministry of Justice;
- 17,000 records with details of SATs markers being mislaid;
- the further associated loss of national insurance numbers for those 17,000 people; and
- other losses, which are too numerous to mention.

The problem is that it is hard to assign blame because the range of occurrences is very broad and has been at various stages of the data handling process. Developing a blame culture is not the answer, what we need is a total rethink on the standards set in the public sector for data handling. Local government is not immune from these problems, with many reported losses of data during transmission and matching of computer files.

All of this amounts to a very worrying national picture of a complete breakdown of basic data protection procedures. The wider impact of these losses cannot be easily measured. But what me must consider is how this affects the every day person? Will they ever trust any level of government to safely manage their personal details again?

We must also consider the damage done by these problems. What is the financial impact of the cessation of data matching? What has been the cost to the exchequer in the fight against fraud? And what effect has there been on the take-up of benefits – what is the real cost for those in poverty struggling to come to terms with the ever increasing cost of living?

But there is light at the end of the tunnel. The Department for Work and Pensions is moving forward with the programme to connect all local authorities to their secure network through Government Connect. When complete, this will restore confidence in the data relationships between central and local government in the administration of housing and council tax benefit.

Local authorities and government departments are reviewing and refreshing their data protection procedures and protocols. Private contractors are being made to conform to strict data protection standards as part of contract terms and conditions. It is essential that normality returns as soon as possible, to ensure that data can be progressively used to improve efficiency and the quality of life.

“This amounts to a very worrying national picture of a complete breakdown of basic data protection procedures”
Ironman Association

Has Nigel Morse of the South Wales Association become the first Association President to complete an Ironman Triathlon, Insight asks.

Nigel entered the Ironman Austria 2008 event on the evening of last year’s IRRV Annual Reception, having done a few triathlons in the past – but the Ironman is way ahead in terms of the sheer stamina required. It involved swimming 2.4 miles (3.8km), powering around 112 miles (180km) on a bike and finishing off with running a marathon of 26.2 miles (42km). Each of these components are testing enough in isolation, but for this event, all three had to be completed within 17 hours.

Overall, including transition times, Nigel finished in 13 hours and seven minutes. He said: “I was delighted to have completed, and elated to achieve it in this creditable time. It will take a little while to recover from the physical effects – a painful right knee and stiff left shoulder – but I will always remember the thrill of crossing the line!”

Nigel did the event to raise money for charity, to sponsor him, check out: www.justgiving.com/nigelmorse.

Netshare Roses Cricket Challenge

On a typically wet summer’s afternoon at Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire successfully retained the NetShare Roses Cricket Challenge after beating Lancashire by two runs. Yorkshire won the toss to bat first, rattling up 44 for 5 from their first innings. Lisa Rawson, the only female participant, greatly impressed with the bat. Lancashire then fell two runs short at 42, despite the valiant efforts of Peter Blakey producing Pietersen-like boundaries.

The teams were poised to take the field for the second innings when the umpire declared the pitch had become too wet, and with no real understanding of the ‘Duckworth-Lewis method’, a ‘bowl off’, which eventually came down to the two captains, was agreed. Paul Ellis hit middle stump and when Peter failed to replicate, Yorkshire won.

Many thanks to Mentec for organising the match and if anyone wishes to participate in next year’s game, contact Darren Walklate at Mentec or the respective captains.

IRRV Annual Conference & Exhibition 2008

The IRRV would like to thank the following companies for their sponsorship at the IRRV Annual Conference & Exhibition 2008.
The Board is an independent body within the Institute comprised of a range of experts covering all of the IRRV’s disciplines, as well as education and assessment. The majority of members are IRRV qualified and others have equivalent professional or degree-level qualifications. The role of the Board covers many different things, including:
- running the examination centres;
- appointing examiners;
- commissioning and editing papers;
- considering candidate requests for special treatment;
- moderating and approving results;
- awarding prizes; and
- supervising examiners’ reviews and appeals.

The Board meets six times a year to oversee the management of all the examinations and assessments for England, Wales and Scotland. Examiners are allocated subjects dependant on their expertise and experience in setting papers and marking schedules, in accordance with the syllabus – recognising up-to-date workplace knowledge and skills. Each examiner is allocated a Board member as ‘mentor’ to ensure the criterion is met. Exam papers and marking schedules are then scrutinised by the Board to ensure they are fair and consistent with the syllabus. The ten exam centres are under the Board’s umbrella, from booking the accommodation to appointing the superintendents and invigilators. All centres are to be visited on a rota basis to ensure that Institute standards are met and maintained. Board members visited eight of the centres in June.

Exam scripts are forwarded to examiners, who initially mark a set number of scripts before liaising with their mentors to agree that the marks are consistent with their marking schedule. The examiner will then mark the rest of the scripts and moderate where there could be a possible marginal fail. Candidates’ marks are then forwarded to headquarters for approval by the Board, which can also moderate dependant on the candidates’ strengths in other subjects. Prizes are awarded to candidates who achieve more than 70% of the marks in any subject and they are invited to an event at the Annual Conference. The results are posted on the IRRV website and all candidates are notified of their achievement (distinction, pass, marginal fail or fail) by post.

Candidates may ask for a review of their results subject to an appropriate fee. The examiner will be asked to review their performance (e.g. strengths and weaknesses) and the marks awarded. If the review is successful, it will be referred back to the Board or the Chair for approval. There is a further right of appeal direct to the Board, the decision of which, is final.

Headquarters staff consider representations from candidates, employers and tutors regarding interpretation of the syllabus and the content of individual exam papers, past and present. All decisions are made by reference to the law, the regulations and best practice. The Board will generally reach a consensus on precedent and fairness while being mindful of upholding the high standards required by both internal and external regulation.

### CV IN BRIEF:

Dave Chapman is a past President of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association and is now a Board member at Rossendale enforcement services, having joined the company in 2004 as Client Services Executive.
How many people reading this article have accessed the Institute’s website (www.irrv.net)? I’ll throw a challenge to you – spend a few minutes having a look. If you feel it can be further improved please feed back your comments to the Institute and me via the online feedback form provided on the website.

I have a question for you… each week I receive statistical information on the hits to the Institute’s website. Do you know the actual country (outside of the UK and Ireland) that hits the IRRV website the most? Answers by email to the Editor (jcroberts54@hotmail.com), who I have persuaded to offer a prize for the first correct answer.

Local government can always use statistics to try to paint a picture, but it may surprise you that the only continent not to hit the Institute’s website is Antarctica. With hits from people all over the rest of the world, my target is to get one from Antarctica before or during the Manchester Annual Conference – hopefully the gala dinner on 2 October will get a penguin or two keying in!

We are aiming to have daily Annual Conference updates on the website this year, which will be particularly helpful to those who cannot attend in person. Another new facility we hope to launch is a mobile version of the IRRV website, allowing delegates to view popular parts of the website on their mobile devices. The biggest success, though, from the use of the website in Brighton at last year’s Conference, was the live news of the Performance Award winners during the actual event. The results were updated online live as they were announced on stage. We had over 1,200 hits during the event and in the three hours directly afterwards. The Institute is hoping to provide a similar service in 2008 for the Performance Awards – look out for further details on the website.

We know, from our weekly statistics, that the two most popular parts of the website are the President’s Blog and the Associations’ web pages. President Bob has done a fabulous job keeping his blog updated this year, and our President-elect, Julie Holden, has agreed to continue the tradition started by Allan Traynor last year, during her forthcoming reign.

The Association web pages are an important access channel to the Institute, shown by the number of visitors to each Association’s web pages. A count is kept on each Association’s main page, and there is already a competition among them to see who can get the most visitors. Over the coming months, we will be looking to update the Association’s web pages, based on the current IRRV Scotland web pages. Beginning with the East Anglian Association site, with help from Joanne Stanton from King’s Lynn to move this forward.

Another recent addition to the website is pages dedicated to council tax capping. I work at Bedford Borough Council, which did not have to rebill for council tax in 2008/9, but colleagues in Lincolnshire were not so fortunate. To assist them and to help future authorities, we have set up a secure area on the website (www.irrv.net/capping) that includes good practice and a discussion board. The Local Government Association also has access to this secure area, and has already added material and comments. The capping website will be kept fully updated for future reference, so if authorities face capping in future years, this resource will be available to them. Do contact the IRRV if you would like access to this secure area.

I could not finish this without paying tribute to the work of Mark Wallis, the IRRV’s Website Manager. On the whole, the website improvements are down to him, but together, we will continue to strive towards further improvement.
The President and friends

The end of President Bob Trahem’s Institute reign is here and Insight pays a photographic tribute to a fantastic year of work and play!

Photographs courtesy of Richard Guy, ARM Photography and John Roberts
New beginnings

The start of the new term is nearly upon us and Les Tuckwell has some words of encouragement for new and returning students.

Les Tuckwell is Distance Learning Centre Manager

The weather this year seems just as bad as it did at the start of last year’s autumn term, but let’s hope we have had at least some sunshine as we look forward to a new academic year and think seriously about study once again.

Don’t forget that there is a lot of useful information on the DLC website: (http://lis.newport.ac.uk/dlc/index.html), which will help you in your studies and prepare you for the exams. Please take an early opportunity to look at the Student Guide – it might even be worth a second read if you have read it before.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, I do not have the student day dates. I hope these will have been organised by the time you read this and you that you will be aware of where and when they are. If you have any questions, please contact me in the usual way, at any time.

We are arranging for modules to be revised and will be sending them out shortly. I wish you the very best for the new session, and ask that you make sure we have your up-to-date e-mail addresses so we can efficiently pass on the latest information.

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EXAMINATION PASS LIST – JUNE 2008

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We want to know what you think. Whether you agree or disagree with *Insight*’s contributors, whether you like or dislike the magazine or whether there’s something you just want to get off your chest, we want to hear from you! Our favourite published letter each month will win a Lamy 2000 fountain pen worth £100.* Please send comments to the Editor, John Roberts at: jcroberts54@hotmail.com

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| David Flynn                                  | Southend on Sea Borough Council |
| Geraint Harris                               | City and County of Swansea |
| Lynn Holder                                  | Test Valley Borough Council |
| Rachel Holman                                | Kings Lynn & West Norfolk Borough |
| Jamie Jones                                  | Pembrokeshire County Council |
| Zoe Kent 3                                   | Swale Borough Council |
| Jacqueline Macsporran                        | Melton Borough Council |
| Thomas Main                                  | Derwentwater District Council |
| Sarah Musson                                 | Leicester City Council |

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An evolutionary service
Web-based transactions not only achieve significant cost reductions for LAs, but also greatly enhance customer service and free up staff time. Rob De Felice urges authorities to evolve their technology.

“A ‘self-serviced’ web transaction is 46 times less costly than a face-to-face transaction”

As practitioners, there are so many challenges to face as you aspire to deliver the most efficient and effective revenues and benefits service, while providing value for money. One of the many aims is to encourage the residents you serve to ‘channel shift’, i.e., motivate them to move away from unnecessary face-to-face contact to telephone contact, and from telephone contact to the web.

Sir David Varney kick-started the process by recommending that public service organisations should reduce the number of information requests handled by telephone by 50%, and make the web the primary access point for all simple information and advice requests, such as council tax (CT) payment status, for example. Latterly, the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR07) placed greater emphasis on cost cutting in local authorities (LAs), further increasing the need to reduce overheads including those costs associated with customer contact.

It was announced as part of CSR07 that all LAs in England and Wales will be required to collect data and report on ‘avoidable contact’ from October 2008. The recently revised version of the National Indicator 14, which is driving this issue, suggests a successfully completed web service transaction will now generally fall into the category of avoidable contact. This is an incentive for any LA to actively promote self-service options for as many web service requests as possible – with the aim that most of them are fully completed without any need for further contact.

Widely circulated figures from the North West e-Government Group (NWeGG) clearly demonstrate the business case for channel shifting to the web. Its research shows that a ‘self-serviced’ web transaction is 24 times less costly than a telephone transaction and 46 times less costly than a face-to-face transaction, a real incentive to undertake channel transition. Where a web transaction is efficiently completed, it is only to be expected that citizen perception and satisfaction rates will also increase.

Evolving Services

On the whole, LAs’ websites today are best described as ‘evolving’. Socitm’s annual Better Connected report published in March 2008 states that in the vast majority of cases LA websites reach only the “standard” rating – this year 303 LA websites fell into this category. This suggests that they provide useful content and offer some examples of online self-service features. They allow individual users to define their own search criteria; they may include links to services such as Girobank for online payments and offer on-line databases for items such as planning applications and committee meeting minutes.

Overall these websites are highly content laden and often fall short of the opportunity to be classed as a true, efficient and effective web channel. All citizens have the right to expect to have access to relevant information and to be able to fully complete transactions – with speed and reliability.

The Future

If LAs really want to make the transition to the web and benefit from cost reductions, reduce avoidable contact and, most importantly, improve service for citizens, they must now look to offer more advanced, personalised, services via the web that meet everyday needs.

Secure Online Accounts

LAs should now be offering citizens secure online access to account-based applications including CT, NNDR, benefits, housing rents, sundry debtors and sundry creditors.

Through these secure online personal accounts, citizens can access, view and interrogate information and answer their own enquiries at any time of day or night. For the citizen, this enables easy access to personalised account information and the opportunity to obtain answers to their own questions instantly.
For the LA, this enables a reduction in costly telephone enquiries (as citizens answer their own enquiries online) and a reduction in avoidable contact (as citizens get answers to their own questions at the first time of asking).

SECURE ONLINE CORRESPONDENCE

Next generation websites operating secure online accounts in tandem with an electronic document management system should include copies of correspondence between LA and citizen for the citizen to view. This should include completed forms, replies to forms and letters, notifications from the LA and adhoc letters.

Again, for citizens this enables easier access to personalised information and the opportunity to obtain answers to questions instantly. It will also help to reduce calls to an LA from citizens chasing for feedback or status updates on requests or enquiries. Similarly, for the LA it enables a reduction in avoidable contact as citizens can answer their own questions, monitor case progress and check records on a specific interaction with an authority – all first time with no requirement for repeat contact.

TRANSACTION PROCESSING

Websites should also look to include transaction processing capabilities, the ability to process citizens’ requests with some degree of automation.

Most LAs will need to use e-forms to collect data to begin a transaction. Self-service e-forms can contain business logic for making the data collection process more efficient and e-forms may even be able to ask more or less questions of a citizen depending on the information provided.

Using an API link, once the e-form is complete it can be sent directly to the back-office for processing. This avoids the problem of taking an electronic or printed form and re-keying it into the back-office.

In many cases authorities find that 80-90% of transactions can be classed as ‘normal’ and do not need a member of staff to review them before processing. Where the back-office is configured to process the normal transactions instantly and only hold the exceptions for a review by a staff member, many more benefits emerge.

Ultimately, the citizen receives a faster service. Additionally, back-office staff spend much less time on straight-forward requests, focusing more effort on the exceptional requests and thereby improving processing time on more complex cases.

While those citizens moving to self-service via the web will undoubtedly benefit in terms of faster service, the savings achieved by them moving will benefit the citizens who cannot move to self-service. LAs will be able to deploy more of their resources to work directly with the disadvantaged. Web-based self-service will be a major benefit for all citizens.

To put this into context, one LA has determined it receives 1.25m forms a year and that a significant proportion of the cost of processing these forms (on average around £2.34 per form) is the data entry time. It estimates that self-service e-forms, on the other hand, would cost as little as 10p each. On these figures, the potential to achieve significant cost reductions is plain. Indeed, the LA conservatively estimates saving £940,000 over five years.

SECURE FACE-TO-FACE TRANSACTION PROCESSING

The web, and specifically secure online accounts, also has its place in evolving home visits by revenues and benefits staff to residents.

LAs completing forms, such as a benefits application form, and collecting copies of supporting documentation to residents in the home, should now be using a secure online account (via an internet connection) to input information directly to an e-form which can be automatically processed into the back-office without any additional staff intervention. Using the web in this way to support home visits increases efficiency, cuts costs and reduces avoidable contacts with the citizen in the future. Naturally, the same processed information can be presented to the citizen via a secure personal account, if need be.

CONCLUSION

Authorities have the opportunity to achieve a significant reduction in costs, reduce avoidable contact, free up staff to spend more time with disadvantaged residents, and provide major improvements in services to citizens. To achieve these goals, LAs must look to a self-service future and embrace flexible technologies that can evolve and scale their existing applications into complete web-based self-services in line with customer demand. LAs need to adopt technologies that make information available quickly and easily, while delivering a more personalised view. This, together with a wide-range of self-service options, will reduce avoidable contact and can only serve to increase customer satisfaction.

“‘The web also has its place in evolving home visits by revenues and benefits staff to residents’”

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Winning isn’t everything. Or is it?

With the 2007/8 Round World Clipper Race now over, Andy Milner ponders the similarities between a winning sailing team and a successful local authority, and asks how success really should be measured.
Duggie has a reputation for being a charismatic leader and someone who takes winning very seriously. In reality, you need more than this when you are working with a crew of novice ocean sailors. My opportunity to find out more came as I helped to crew the Durban Clipper to Gosport, where she will be refitted prior to the 2009/10 race. The 2007/8 crew were more than happy to share their experiences on the race and to offer thier advice for next year.

In some ways we see similar situations in local government where a change in management can be the catalyst for an upturn in performance. The New York crew had received a mini re-training session when they were in Brazil: practicing sail evolutions (changing sail configurations) until they could do it in their sleep, and making sure every crew member knew exactly what was expected of them. Many of the major tasks had to be broken down so that crew members could focus and learn how to do specific roles well. Crew members found themselves excelling in certain tasks, and Duggie played to those strengths to drive the boat up through the rest of the fleet. If this sounds familiar, it’s totally different to office work. Generic staff are increasingly used to providing a more effective and rounded service to the customer, but on an individual level it could be argued that output is not as high as those who are specialised and, more importantly, carrying out the job that interests them most. This division of the labour approach to efficiency is tried and tested, not to mention accurately summarised on the reverse of the new £20 note!

It was fortunate that they won their first race under Duggie, since this raised self-belief in the crew and enhanced confidence in their skipper, proving vital in the 26,000 miles remaining to Liverpool. Interestingly, the boats that finished in 2nd and 3rd place (Hull and Glasgow) also used specialists on the different tasks, but some would argue that this is not fully embracing the ethos of the Clipper Round the World Race.

Most individuals (including me) have signed up for the race because we are looking for a new challenge. A chance to step out of our comfort zones and to acquire new skills. To be honest, I don’t really want to become a winch grinder – I want to work at the bow. I want to helm. I even want to help out in the galley and develop into a rounded ocean sailor. Who knows, it may even lead to a career change!

As we sailed back to Gosport, my own skipper told me a story about when the Durban Clipper almost secured a podium position in an earlier race. Their position was strong, but they had adopted a strict rota on the helm to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to experience steering the boat in all sorts of conditions. They also saw that their strongest helmsman was two or three watches away, by which time it would be too late. Do you switch the rota and go for the win or do you avoid anything that risks demoralising an individual crew member? In the end, ethos won and Durban failed to secure a pennant, settling for a mid-table position.

One of these management styles favours team performance and the other, personal development, but neither approach is right or wrong. It’s exactly the same balance we seek to achieve in running an office. Interestingly, Jamaica Clipper is the only boat never to secure a podium position, but they did receive the accolade of being voted as the happiest and closest crew in the fleet – undoubtedly proving that there are different ways of winning.

The trip back from Liverpool to Gosport was a fantastic experience – my first voyage on one of the boats that I will race around the world on next year. Despite the force-seven winds in the Irish Sea I was fortunate to escape the symptoms of sea sickness, but the nighttime helming at ten knots in low visibility was a nerve racking experience that will serve me well in the future! The 2007/8 crew members said it was good to experience rough conditions, as it won’t all be sunshine next year. I did explain that I was yet to experience anything less than force seven! Severingly on cue, as we left Weymouth for our last leg to Gosport, the sun came out and we put the spinnaker up for some perfect sailing up the Solent, to end the week on a high.

With the 2007/8 race now over, the reality of my own challenge is sinking in. I have completed two of the six training courses I am contractually required to attend prior to the race, and our fundraising for the Rainbow Centre in Fareham has passed the £2,000 mark, thanks in no small way to a very successful corporate golf day at Hamptworth Golf and Country Club in Hampshire. The Rainbow Centre website (www.rainbowcentre.org) is well worth a look if you haven’t done so already. There is a fine analogy between the way it tackles the treatment of cerebral palsy, and the management approach I describe.

Don’t forget you can follow my training at www.meridian360.me.uk and read more about our Rainbow charity at www.rainbowcentre.org.
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Designing paperless systems is only half the battle, Trafford Council has discovered. Effective marketing of e-initiatives is also necessary.

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The Olympics can inspire benefits managers, says David Hendy

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**Payment methods**
Moving from cash to card payments has proved successful for Canterbury CC

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**Document management**
Mike Turner believes that effective document handling has made work more efficient

**Data mining**
The DD barrier has been broken by BACS and its partner councils

**Collection and enforcement**
Collection rates at Rochdale MBC have improved, say Rob Andrews and Iain Hodgson
The Northern Ireland Assembly was restored just over a year ago, after a period of suspension lasting over five years, during which time the rating system was radically overhauled. One of the first things the Executive did was undertake a review of the new system introduced under direct rule – a system that may have found favour elsewhere with policy experts but attracted notoriety locally given the political context in which it was introduced, “no taxation, without representation”, was the cry from many.

The review was fundamental, and completed in record time. Something that would normally take two years took little over 200 days, including a three-month public consultation exercise. It created a huge challenge, as local taxation is such an emotive subject.

The political momentum was such that failure to deliver was not an option. Indeed the Minister at the time suggested to the Assembly that it represented a litmus test for the success of devolution, no less. Despite the pressure, the research, analysis and consultation underpinning the review has been thorough and extensive – covering reliefs but also examining more radical change. The cases for local income tax and land value tax were also looked at, though not taken forward, perhaps recognising that the creation of a new set of winners and losers would mean another period of instability, with political consequences.

It was this “assessment of impacts” approach that informed the Executive and led them to agree a balanced package of measures that preserved the main elements of...
the new capital value system. Importantly, however, the devolved changes moderated excesses in the system and made it more responsive to inability to pay, with a particular emphasis on pensioners. Evidence-based and consensus-built policy outcomes developed at speed.

Take, for example, pensioners, who, from April 2008, have been able to benefit from two new policies that emerged from the review: the new lone pensioner allowance, providing a 20% discount on rates bills for pensioners aged 70 and over living alone, and pensioners with savings or capital of up to £50,000 to remain eligible for the low income rate relief scheme, an increase from £16,000. The scheme was originally introduced in April 2007 and sits above the long-standing housing benefit (HB) system, providing additional rate relief to those who do not qualify or only partially qualify for HB. Further changes will occur in 2009/10.

A series of consultations is currently underway (with some completed) in relation to a range of policies. The Executive is planning to reduce the maximum capital value that can be applied to a domestic property within the domestic rating system from £500,000 to £400,000. This change will bring the highest bills under the rating system locally into line with the average bills within the highest band of council tax.

Another change, which complements the pensioner measures, is the introduction, from 2010 onwards, of a deferment scheme for home owning pensioners – allowing pensioners who meet set eligibility criteria to defer rate payments by securing them against the equity in their homes. While this is not an option that will be taken lightly, it provides an option for pensioners who may not be entitled to any other form of relief.

The rating of empty homes at 100% is another policy that is being taken forward, with its primary objective being one of improving housing affordability.

The Executive also plans to introduce a rate rebate for those who carry out energy efficient measures to their homes, such as loft and cavity wall insulation, and an initial rates exemption, for up to five years, for the first residents of zero carbon homes.

Reaching consensus on a system as broad and as complex as the rating system is going to require a great deal of effort. The Government has been able to make some progress, but the changes already made, and those in the pipeline, are going to require much more work. The Board will finalise its suggestions at its next meeting this month.

Further details about the reforms can be found at www.ratingreviewni.gov.uk.

New approaches

Maureen Neave brings us up to date with the latest developments within the Benefit Faculty Board

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Treasury's joint internal review of housing benefit was announced in the spring Budget. The intention is to examine whether more could be done to ensure that housing benefit provides value for money, assists with child poverty and helps move people from welfare to work.

No formal consultation accompanies this internal review, but the Board is acting on the DWP's willingness to accept evidence informally. An Institute paper will be submitted soon. A point that may well feature is one that has been made from several public platforms of late – why shouldn't local authorities (LAs) be allowed to deliver the front line gateway for all benefits? Perhaps the government should have been a bit more forward thinking in its planning to allow local authorities to take Pension Credit claims and council tax benefit claims.

LAs and several software suppliers have reported considerable difficulties with the way in which data is being treated within the single housing benefit extract (SHBE). One practitioner reported that the extract showed a processing time of 600,000 days for one claim – clearly not the stuff of upper quartile performance! Here at the Vale of Glamorgan, we have also had difficulties with the extract; when run, it had both over and underestimated data in certain areas. The Board will be voicing its concerns about this matter to ensure that inaccuracies (both the obvious and not-so-obvious) do not impact adversely on LAs’ performance and the setting of future targets. Local Authority Associations have also reiterated their concerns, at the DWP Steering Group, that LAs cannot monitor performance effectively, and that some LAs have been charged separately by their software suppliers to enable them to monitor their performance locally, in a way that mirrors the SHBE.

The Institute's response to data sharing proposals in Northern Ireland was due to be submitted by mid-September and the initial draft was discussed at the August meeting. The measures are intended to improve data sharing within government to improve take-up of reliefs. Given that since the relief scheme was introduced in 2007, estimated take-up hovers around the 50% mark, the new measures seem to be much needed.

Increasing take-up can be achieved both by targeting potential recipients and by making the application process easier – this paper deals with the former only, and it would be encouraging if a simplification of the processes was also subject to review in due course. The need for adequate safeguarding is also addressed in the paper, such as advising individuals that the information they provide may be used for another purpose and explaining why they have been targeted.

The Board will finalise its suggestions at its next meeting this month.

Maureen Neave is chair of the Benefits Faculty Board and a member of the RRVC Council.
Successful education, flourishing future

The corporate IRRV qualification is a great aim for any Institute student, benefiting both your working environment and your future prospects, says Bill Lovell

Students usually set out on a course of study with more than one purpose. The short-term objective might be to cope with the burden of study while juggling the demands of work, family and a social life. The medium-term goal may be to pass an exam. In the longer term, the intention is to obtain a qualification. But although a qualification gives satisfaction in several ways, personal achievement, the respect of colleagues and family, etc., the real purpose usually comes down to money!

Study costs money, even with employer support, and if a student stumbles at a hurdle on the way, employer support might only be for the first attempt. Employers provide support because it is in their interests to have a qualified and well-trained workforce, especially in professional areas such as revenues and benefits. But it is far more in the employee's interest to have a qualification, because evidence of certain skills and knowledge inevitably leads to opportunities to earn more. This means that most students see the cost of study as being an investment in their future, and believe that the investment will be returned with interest by way of higher pay.

With the IRRV, technician membership is available to students who pass the Certificate Level III exam. There is little doubt that technician membership by exam does open up opportunities in benefits sections and in revenues or local taxation sections. In some authorities, the revenues or benefits manager will be fully qualified but in others it may be someone who passed IRRV at technician level and did not go on to the full corporate examination.

So what should the current student do? Follow the example of some others who have seen the technician level as all they need to aim for! Just do enough to better their current position and not commit to study for too long! Certainly some students will limit their ambitions to this level and there is nothing wrong with that. For many it will deliver what they have set as their target, and there's no doubt that IRRV technicians are experts in their field. They may not feel they are experts when they sit the exam, still filled with doubt about how effective the study programme has been, but once the pass notice arrives, people realise that they have proved their own ability and that the knowledge gain has far exceeded what they may have thought possible. This is the point at which people can realise that technician need not be the limit of ambition. If the technician level brings career opportunities, corporate membership of the IRRV virtually guarantees a well-paid position. More than that, it is the route to a more senior job and to better prospects of job satisfaction.

When you are setting out on a course of study it can be difficult to imagine that you could sit in the bosses chair, taking decisions that affect the council, the customers and the staff, and holding your own with other senior managers. But this is what the full IRRV qualification prepares you for. To some extent that is also why it takes more than a single year, because while studying, the student is also developing in other ways, perhaps changing jobs, gradually taking on more responsibility. At the end of the corporate course you may well feel you are not the same person who started out.

People do reach senior management in revenues and benefits with just the technician level qualification, but the corporate IRRV qualification smooths the way, as the fully qualified candidate is likely to be better placed to handle the unexpected.

Bill Lovell is a former examiner and member of the IRRV Examinations and Assessment Board. He is a freelance local government consultant and trainer and a member of the IRRV Council.
The credit crunch and yet more revisions to benefit rules are making it difficult to motivate staff. **David Hendy** recommends that managers look to the Olympics for inspiration.

As our television screens are filled with athletes attempting to win medals in the Beijing Olympic Games, it struck me that maybe what we need is our very own version for everyone working in housing benefit (HB) offices. Typically, it would need to be a multi-disciplined affair, simply because benefits by its very nature involves wearing many hats.

So how is this for our first series of events? The 100 minute PFA circular read and interpret; jumping the eligibility hurdles for students; understanding and believing self-employed claim evidence; rowing through Regulation 9 and contrivance rules; target shooting at LHA values; marathon running to get DHPs; and writing appeals submissions while time trial cycling. And the toughest event of all - writing an understandable overpayment decision notice. Maybe all but the last are doable and believable, I know! On a more serious note, though, we will shortly be asking our change-weary benefit staff to deal with yet another significant set of amendments to the benefit rules, with the introduction of the new employment and support allowance. That’s not to mention other significant October changes like the new three month backdating arrangements. It can be very hard to keep reaching for yet another target, and the need to keep motivated for yet another challenge undoubtedly flexes the minds of many of you. The textbook offerings of keeping staff involved in the change process, rotating duties, setting realisable targets, rewarding good performance etc., all have their place, but during a ‘credit crunch’ I’m sure more money would be the favoured motivator. In reality, this is one option that’s probably not available in most cases.

You can, of course, resort to asking your staff what would motivate them, but the shopping list may be endless and read something like this: six months paid leave; a Ferrari; mortgage paid off; various gold and diamond items; and a world cruise. And so on…….all of which you will also find equally tempting, but a little out of reach of the average benefits manager. So what’s needed is a little innovation, and as going down the pub is neither a healthy nor a cheap option these days, why not our very own Benefit Olympics.

Staff should be encouraged to form teams and enter as many events as they feel able to compete in. Refreshments, non-alcoholic, could also be made available. And the prize for the team winning the most gold medals, well that’s again a manager decision, but I wouldn’t recommend overtime on ESA cases! Oh, by the way, I’m back in local government myself again from September, so I’ll let you know how the Games of the First Benefits Olympiad go! ■

David Hendy IRRV is Benefits Manager with Herefordshire Council
We are all familiar with the T-Government agenda, and many revenues and benefits services now offer at least some transactional online services such as online payments and paperless billing. However, as more services go online every week, the challenge is to maximise usage through effective promotion, rationalising processes, increased accessibility and staff and stakeholder education.

At Trafford Council, we have introduced a number of e-initiatives over the past three years including:

- website development;
- paperless direct debits;
- paperless billing;
- paperless benefit notification letters;
- online account access for benefits, NNDR and Council Tax;
- SMS texting; and
- e-benefits application forms.

Now these initiatives are up and running, we are developing an e-services marketing strategy which will address communication, staff training, streamlining processes and the introduction of new services. As with any effective plan, we will be measuring current take-up levels (e.g. e-billing registrations, website hits, number of completed e-benefit forms) by setting objectives and developing plans to achieve these targets.

We have already started work on some of these areas and have implemented a number of campaigns to increase paperless billing registrations and website and direct debit take-up.

### Website Development

This is an important area that is often left solely in the hands of the web development team. At Trafford Council we worked with the web team to develop the site, combining the web design skills of the developer with the service and customer knowledge of our staff. Using this approach we researched other sites, consulted with stakeholders and worked with the developer to add new content and re-design our web pages, making them easier to navigate, more transactional and more user friendly.

Now the site is fully developed, the web team have devolved access to us, ensuring updates can be made quickly and easily. We receive monthly statistics giving the number of hits per page and forms downloaded, so we can monitor usage and analyse customer information.

### Paperless Billing

We introduced paperless billing in August 2006, but despite our efforts to increase take up, registrations remained low. Research from our own Council Tax satisfaction survey showed that only 27% of respondents were aware the service existed, and a massive 82% could not see the value in switching. It was evident that we needed to raise awareness and provide an incentive.

After much deliberation we decided to focus the campaign on the environmental benefits of e-billing. We calculated that in 2007/08, it took nearly 10 tonnes of paper to produce the booklets, envelopes and bills alone! The environmental benefits of paperless billing were clear, and this led nicely to the campaign title of ‘Council Tax does not need to cost the earth!’

To add value to the campaign, we teamed up with Groundwork, an environmental charity, to arrange a charitable donation. We pledged to donate 20p per registration for the duration of the campaign. The only caveat was that the money would be reinvested in an environmental project within Trafford. This extra incentive was publicised on all our communications and helped maximise results.

We promoted the campaign over a ten week period by:

- issuing 94,000 inserts with the Council Tax bills;
- promoting the message on the front page of the Council Tax booklets;
- promoting the message on all inbound phone calls;
- publishing homepage features on the internet and intranet;
- publicising the campaign on Trafford TV and through a number of news releases;
- placing an article in our council newspaper, Trafford Today.

Using the same message and copy over a variety of channels we were able to maximise our results. During the ten week period we received over 1,300 new registrations, which helped us raise money for charity and reduced our printing and postage costs, delivering year-on-year efficiencies. A win/win situation for everyone. We will be running a similar campaign next year, which we will open up to our neighbouring councils.
Paperless technology

Paperless direct debits
As well as introducing paperless direct debit facilities we launched a number of other initiatives to increase the accuracy and efficiency of the scheme, helping us increase our direct debit take up from 49,000 in August 2007 to 52,000 in August 2008, an increase of 6%. These initiatives included:

● lodging direct debit instructions electronically with the customer’s bank (AUDDIS). This means we have less errors at the ‘point of sale’ together with quicker set up times;
● upgrading our reminder and second reminder notices to include a direct debit mandate, helping to convert late payers into efficient direct debit payers;

“In 2007/08, it took nearly ten tonnes of paper to produce the booklets, envelopes and bills alone!”

• providing training for customer service staff, giving them the confidence to promote and sell direct debit to our customers over the phone and face to face.

Since introducing AUDDIS the number of unpaid direct debits has reduced by over 30%. In the past year, we have transformed the direct debit scheme to help us achieve our best ever collection rate. Our next goal is to offer online direct debit facilities over the website and develop and implement a new take-up campaign.

Online e-claim forms
Most of us recognise that the future lies with online claim form technology, but very few councils are exploiting it to its full advantage. Merely replicating paper-based systems is not an option - councils need to develop more efficient working practices.

To get the most out of the system, we became the first IBS site in the country to fully integrate the online claim form with OpenRevenues (our back office system). This means that customer information is captured at source and automatically transferred to our benefits system, reducing claim processing times and eliminating input errors. The more e-forms we receive, the more efficient and effective the process.

To tap into this potential we process mapped our new claims processes. We then evaluated this information and developed new services such as an assisted service route through our new claims appointment services, making the whole process more efficient and changing the way we interact with residents. At the appointment an advisor fills in an online form, verifies customer information and assesses their claim while they wait, providing a streamlined end-to-end service.

Since integrating the form, appointment times have dropped by approximately 15 minutes, and we are completing more claims each day.

The future
In the future, we plan to develop the e-form further and increase take-up by piloting a visiting service, using mobile technology for over 60s and utilising the appointment service for working age customers. We also plan to work in partnership with registered social landlords to offer online facilities through RSL offices. We are developing a suite of new forms and adding new functionality to the e-form, so customers understand exactly what they need to bring in.

We have come a long way in a short time, but there is still a lot of work for us all to do before we start to reap the full rewards of our investment in technology.

Carl Lamb is Customer Development and Support Services Manager with Trafford Council
An easy step forward

Canterbury City Council has greatly improved payment efficiency by moving away from a traditional cashier service onto a payment card system. **Andrew Stevens** reports

In line with most other local authorities, Canterbury City Council is faced with the challenge of trying to reduce its costs while providing improved and more responsive service.

Preparation for the council’s four-year budget plan involves all divisions putting forward a detailed proposal to reduce direct budgets by 10% over a four-year period. To make sure that Service Heads follow the process correctly and do not just put forward arbitrary savings ideas, we all have to spend time in front of a panel of councillors explaining exactly how we propose to reduce our budgets without reducing quality of service. Those of you who watch the *Dragons’ Den* can probably imagine the process!

For years we had been running an in-house cashiers service at the main office in Canterbury, and also in the satellite offices at Herne Bay and Whitstable. Analysis of the service revealed that the numbers of customers using this face-to-face service was declining each year while direct budgets increased. The knock-on effect was increased unit costs every year. Clearly this needed to be examined to see if there was a more cost-effective way of providing the service.

Plastic payment cards had been considered in the past, and a decision was made not to proceed with them at the time, but we thought it was time for a review.

We carried out market analysis to gauge the suppliers who could supply this service and carried out a survey of customers using cashiers in the summer of 2007. Interestingly, 72% of our customers told us they would like to be given the option of a payment card to use at their local shop or post office to pay council bills. Our own research found over 70 outlets in the district where people could pay bills using these cards.

After agreement from our Corporate Management Team and councillors, we began a tendering exercise under EU procurement rules. This process ended in October 2007 and we chose our preferred supplier, payment solution specialist allpay.net. It was asked to supply a payment card solution for council tax, benefit overpayments, business rates, housing rents and garages. We also wanted a barcode solution for sundry debt invoices and parking penalty charge notices.

Looking back at the project now, the key to its success was extensive communication – both internal and external. We started our publicity campaign at least five months before the cashiers closed by handing out leaflets, producing several newspaper releases, introducing “countdown clocks” at cashiers’ desks and holding internal briefing sessions for council departments affected by the change.

We maintained daily contact with allpay during the project, and deadlines were closely monitored throughout.

We went live with the payment card on 1 March 2008 and closed our cashiering function at the end of March. Sundry debtors’ invoices are now barcoded, and customers are paying in shops and post offices too. We are in the process of implementing bar-coding on parking penalty charge notices.

As a result of these changes we have realised over £60,000 in annual gross budget savings. We have only received two complaints from members of the public, which is reassuring, fully justifying the extensive publicity campaign work undertaken. The project ran on time and on budget (how often can people say that?) thanks to tight project management, a very good internal project team and an extremely effective working relationship with allpay. It is always a challenge to deliver efficiency savings while improving services and we are pleased we managed both with this project.

“An easy step forward”

Canterbury City Council has greatly improved payment efficiency by moving away from a traditional cashier service onto a payment card system. **Andrew Stevens** reports

“As a result of these changes we have realised over £60,000 in annual gross budget savings”

Andrew Stevens is Head of Revenues and Benefits at Canterbury City Council
The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead worked with Datatank to find out who really should be getting a single person discount.

The May issue of Insight explained how Leeds City Council worked with Datatank to review their 120,000 plus accounts with Single Person Discount (SPD). But how effective would this approach have been in a smaller local authority? What about the National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data match? Does it have to be looked at in isolation or can you combine them to get the best of both worlds?

In the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM), 17,500 accounts with SPD needed review, and it isn't easy to incorporate a complete review into the day-to-day work of a council tax (CT) team.

The council decided to work with Datatank to enable a complete review to be carried out. Datatank compared the 17,553 addresses against information held by credit reference agency, Callcredit, and found that in 13% of the cases, it appeared that more than one person was active at the address.

RBWM wrote to these people, asking them to complete a form stating who lived at the address, and advising that a credit reference agency would be used. Completed forms were returned directly to Datatank for processing, and investigation, where needed.

Final results showed that of the 17,553 accounts:
- 181 cancelled their SPD directly with the council;
- 185 had the SPD cancelled after admitting to Datatank they should not receive it;
- 152 vacated the property; and
- 273 did not respond to two letters – their SPDs were subsequently cancelled.

After this review, RBWM provided the Audit Commission with data from the CT database and the electoral roll, to enable a national CT exercise to take place.

The results of the NFI National CT exercise became available in April, and showed there were 1,263 cases where SPD was being awarded even though the electoral roll showed there was more than one person registered to vote.

PBWM recognised that due to the above, writing to all 1,263 liable people would not be a good use of resources. So having decided to undertake the main review without writing to all people claiming SPD, RBWM chose to take the same approach with the NFI data match.

An edited version of the NFI results was given to Datatank who then screened them in the same way the initial SPD review was carried out.

Of the 1,263 identified by the NFI, Datatank found that 74% required no further action, leaving only 330 cases to write to, where comparison with Callcredit data suggested there might be more than one occupant.

Of the 330 requiring further investigation, 274 were found to be single occupier households. Subsequently only 4% of the SPDs needed to be cancelled.

Undertaking the initial review in this way, and taking a different approach with the NFI results, meant that avoidable contact with customers was kept to a minimum. In the cases where it was clear from the Datatank matches that there was still an entitlement to SPD, thousands of customers did not have to be contacted at all.

So a combination of using the NFI exercise and using Datatank means that yes, you can get the best of both worlds!
By using a new e-system for dealing with benefit documents, councils can work in a more efficient and paper-free environment. Mike Turner reports

With belts tightening everywhere you look and continued pressure to save, benefits managers cannot afford to miss a trick when it comes to working smarter. They need to deliver substantial cost savings and process time improvements through developing the process for the daily scanning of documents.

By outsourcing this activity to specialists with the scale of operation to deploy the very best practices and equipment, the capital spend and operating costs of an in-house scanning service can be all but eliminated. With the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) funding depending heavily on the ability to process claims speedily, by outsourcing under a daily turnaround service level agreement (SLA), timings can be immediately reduced.

In an outsourced electronic post room (EPR) scenario, the scanning process is treated as a production line, rather than on an individual document basis (think of using a photocopier hopper feed rather than placing every document on the flatbed). In this way, a day's documents can be handled within the day, everyday. As documents are received, they are classified by claim, document type and workflow in-tray, referencing a copy of the claims handling system. They are registered immediately into a correspondence log, and given a unique reference that includes claimant reference, document type and date. Proofs are then copied, verified and set aside.

The unique reference is immediately printed out to a barcoded header sheet, which precedes the document throughout further processing. When a sufficient batch size has been reached, the documents are prepared and repaired, back-trimming multi-page forms. The batch is then scanned by a high-speed production scanner programmed to read the header sheet barcode and index the image automatically. Outputs are quality-checked and uploaded via a secure file transfer to the EDMS/Case Management System without further handling.

At the end of the day the correspondence register prints labels for...
proves returns, recorded delivery labels and a valuables register, corresponding to the documents put to one side during the process, thus closing the loop. This method has proved itself over the past two years for outsourced daily document processing for the benefits department of at least one large London borough. All is completed by the end of the day under a SLA that covers turnaround, indexing accuracy and image quality. Output is an up-loadable file of images, indexed by claimant, document type and workflow work tray. There is no reason why this style of operation cannot be replicated elsewhere, as shown in the diagram (left).

The daily benefits scanning EPR is controlled by Cave Tab's file-tracking software, known as 'FileTrail'. In its pure (paper) file-tracking role, it can be adapted for secure file rooms containing confidential documents and other items, such as police evidence or ‘top secret’ items within the defence and intelligence communities. There have recently been several highly embarrassing breaches of security due to confidential papers being left on trains or stolen in briefcases. FileTrail can be adapted to use RFID radio tag technology to automatically track the movement of a file using hidden radio antenna units that pick up a signal from the RFID file labels. Filetrail will know where the file is, where it has been and when it was moved, recording every movement without human intervention. It can even trigger an alarm or electronic lock to stop the file moving to any place it should not be.

Due to a dramatic reduction in the cost of radio-tagged labels, RFID file tracking is now economically viable, enabling organisations to ensure there will be no embarrassing information leakage, lost files or tagged items leaving their buildings without their knowledge.

Our Northampton-based company has been providing records and information management solutions for over 80 years — from card index systems in the early days to web-hosted digital systems today. We can now handle 200,000 images daily, and with extensive knowledge and experience in all aspects of digital and paper-based records and information management, the transition from paper to electronic records management can be easily managed.

For further information, contact Faye Baker at Quiet Storm Consultants Ltd at: faye@q-storm.co.uk or on 01530 276 550. ■

Mike Turner is Business Development Manager at Cave Tab Ltd

**Direct action**

Local authorities have broken through the direct debit take-up barrier by using a data mining initiative from BACS and Experian. Insight reports

It is widely acknowledged that direct debit is the most efficient method for local authorities (LAs) to collect revenues such as council tax — a point reinforced on numerous occasions by the Audit Commission. However, converting people to pay this way is not always simple. Where some LAs may have a population that is highly receptive to direct debit, others will experience resistance from residents who prefer traditional payment methods, such as cash or cheques.

Over the years, this stumbling block has led many different councils to the conclusion that they have hit a ‘glass ceiling’ and cannot drive direct debit usage any higher. But new information released by payment schemes provider Bacs proves it is possible to push penetration beyond the so-called ‘saturation’ point.

Two councils proactively driving volume to new levels are Colchester Borough Council (CBC) and Sunderland City Council (SCC), both of which have created highly successful marketing campaigns for the use of direct debit, with the help of a data mining solution created jointly by Bacs and Experian. The tool, which can be used to analyse lists of non-direct debit payers, measures residential information against two sets of data. The first produces quantitative results which group householders according to their propensity to switch to direct debit. The second provides qualitative data that identifies key messages that would hold greatest resonance with the target audience and encourage them to make the switch.

Phil Pettit, ICT Programme Manager at Colchester said: “The information from Bacs and Experian revealed that, of the original list of non-direct debit subscribers we supplied, 40% were in groups where there was significant scope for us to convince them of the merits of using direct debit.”

The council also received qualitative data identifying the most effective marketing routes and key messages that would have the greatest impact with residents. As a result, the council developed a tailored campaign aimed at those residents who were most likely to switch.

This decision paid dividends, helping CBC secure an increase of more than 25% in the number of residents using direct debit, raising overall usage to 74% in just two months.

The Bacs/Experian data solution has also been used to great effect by SCC, which had a significant ‘cash culture’ that was preventing it from increasing the number of residents paying by direct debit.

Howard Middlemiss, Revenues Manager at SCC, said: “Although the quantitative information mined from our data did not throw up any real surprises — showing that nearly all residents were in groups unlikely or very unlikely to change — the qualitative data highlighted the most effective ways in which the residents in these groups could be approached to try and persuade them to pay by direct debit. This gave us some fresh ideas to reinvigorate our campaign approach.”

One of the council’s most successful resulting projects was a bus and metro advertising campaign promoting the benefits of paying by direct debit. After reviewing the data provided by Bacs and Experian, the LA moved away from bus-side advertising, recognising car owners — a large proportion of whom already use direct debiting — most often viewed this medium. Instead, a series of adverts were placed on the inside of buses targeting regular public transport users who matched the profile of residents the council was trying to convert. As a result, SCC secured an increase of more than 3,000 residents, despite the heavy reliance on cash payments in the area. ■
Collective improvement

Equita’s Rob Andrews and Iain Hodgeon of Rochdale highlight how their partnership has helped improve collection rates

Successful recovery

Well what a year 2007/8 proved to be for Greater Manchester and Rochdale in particular. Rochdale’s Revenues and Benefits Service increased in-year council tax collection by a whole 1%

Before we get too carried away, this increased collection performance followed an expected dip in 2006/7, during which the service converted council tax, benefits and NNDR systems to a single database in Anite Pericles – a significant implementation with an unavoidable overhead in terms of downtime and consequent impact on workloads. The out-turn performance for 2006/7 was an in-year collection rate of 94.6%, down from 96.6% achieved in 2005/6.

This level of reduced performance generated an expected level of political fall-out, and the service had to put an ambitious 2007/8 target in place to demonstrate a commitment to returning to the previously high levels of collection. The target was set at 95.5% (an increase of 0.9% for the year).

While existing elements of best practice were already in place (multiple direct debit dates, paperless direct debits, 24/7 online and automated telephone payment facilities, etc.), the service clearly needed more than just these in order to deliver on target. Team managers and senior management got their heads together and formulated a recovery action plan. The plan considered issues across printing/reporting, processes, and staffing. Some ideas included:

● weekly production of attachment of earnings orders and deductions from income support, continued activity with committal summonses, running of overdue arrangements, monitoring linked accounts in credit, and monitoring of accounts with recovery suppressed;

● timely referrals to the bailiff companies (Equita and Jacobs), as well as close monitoring of their performance, increased use of insolvency for appropriate debts via Incasso, ongoing promotion of direct debit, including mailshots to cash and cheque payers, prioritising activity on high-value debts, and cold-calling pre-summons cases;

● use of pro-active recovery visits by Visiting Officers, generic staff given recovery work as the priority, and additional Pericles recovery training obtained from Anite.

The actual collection out-turn was 95.6%, which was ahead of target but was only achieved by having a committed workforce, the continued support of senior management, and a successful relationship with our partners in the private sector.

Iain Hodgeon is Revenues and Benefits Manager at Rochdale MBC

Onwards and upwards

Year on year, revenues departments are set higher targets to maximise both the collection of council tax and business rates. As well as the in-year collection performance as a key measure of success, the collection of outstanding arrears is equally important.

When Iain Hodgeon was given the challenge of an in-year collection target of 95.5% for 2007/8, after achieving 94.6% in 2006/7, he sat down with his team to carefully plan how they were going to achieve the figure. Their hard work paid off as they achieved 95.6%, a full 1% year-on-year increase.

Iain said: “Across the General Manchester region any in-year percentage increases have been generally small, with some even reporting a reduced collection performance. The performance on previous years’ arrears was also encouraging, showing us reducing arrears by £2.6m during 2007/8, compared to £1.4m during 2006/7, again exceeding our target reduction of £2m.

“I have no doubt that a significant contribution to our successful improvement in both areas of collection can be attributed to Equita. This was achieved through a collaborative and positive partnership, demonstrating a concerted effort to maximise collection right up until the year-end.”

Paul Sharpe, Sales and Marketing Director for Equita said: “We are delighted to have played a pivotal role in helping Rochdale MBC achieve such an impressive in-year improvement in performance, and feel that the success is testimony to the close relationships forged by our Regional Manager Joanna Dixon and her staff at our Manchester regional centre. As a long standing client we are particularly pleased to help ease some of the pressure Iain and his colleagues are under to meet such a challenging target, and remain committed to carrying on the good work during 2008/9.”

Rob Andrews is Business Development Director – North, with Equita Ltd

Rochdale at a glance:

- property base – 90,000;
- gross debit (2007/8) – £93m;
- net debit (2007/8) – £65m;
- direct debit take-up – 47,500 households;
- benefit caseload – 23,500 cases;
- deprivation index – Rochdale is the 25th most deprived borough; and
- previous years’ arrears performance – 1 April 2007 £6.6m, reduced to £4m by 31 March 2008.

Rob Andrews is Business Development Director – North, with Equita Ltd
NEW Syllabus details announced
From September 2008, subject to approval by the quali-
fications regulators for England and Wales, the revised
Certificate syllabus will be offered in England, Wales
and Scotland. First examinations will take place in
June 2009.

The revised qualification structure will be:
Revenues Pathway
→ Revenues and Benefits Administration
→ Council Tax Law
→ Housing and Council Tax Benefits Law
→ Non-Domestic Rating Law

Benefits Pathway
→ Revenues and Benefits Administration
→ Council Tax Law
→ Housing and Council Tax Benefits Law
→ The Prevention and Detection of Housing and
  Council Tax Benefit Fraud

Valuation Tribunal Pathway
→ Valuation Tribunal Administration
→ Valuation for Rating
→ Council Tax Law
→ Non-Domestic Rating Law

Revised subject content details will be made available
as soon as possible. Candidates who need to complete
the Certificate or Technician qualification under the
current syllabus will be able to do so.

Local Authority Administration Framework will continue
to be examined for at least the December 2008 and
June 2009 sessions. Candidates for other subjects will
be able to complete by taking equivalent subjects under
the new arrangements.

Spotlight on studying by Day Release in London
The Certificate in Local Taxation and Benefits is for
Local Revenues and Benefits staff up to middle
management level. It has been accredited in England,
Wales and Northern Ireland by the QCA, and it may be
taken as a freestanding qualification or as a stepping
stone to study for the Full Professional Qualification.

Who? Local Revenues and Benefits staff wishing
to obtain a professional qualification

How? Expert tuition takes place on Fridays
over three terms

Where? Central London

When? October 2008 until May 2009

Price? £895 plus VAT

For more information regarding studying in London or other locations throughout the UK
call 020 7691 8984 or visit www.irrv.org.uk/courses
A ground-breaking campaign from St Helens council won the IRRV’s Social Inclusion Performance Award 2007 and raised the council’s profile nationally. Theresa Butler reports on what it is like to feel the benefit

Feel the benefit

Careful evaluation of the project has been a significant factor. We keep full records of all customers who are helped through the claims process or contact us in any way as a result of the campaign. We use a database to follow up outstanding cases, recording the source of the enquiry, type of benefit claimed, and the outcome of the claim.

These statistics prove that the project is exceeding all expectations, with annualised figures of over £3m generated in benefits that had previously gone unclaimed. Most of this money is spent locally, and therefore boosts the borough’s economy.

The distinction of winning the performance award has been duly recognised not only by managers and politicians at St Helens Council, but also by the DWP. The Council’s Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health shows huge support for the campaign, and demonstrated this by inviting the team to a local presentation, held at The World of Glass, during the launch of the Safeguarding Adults initiative.

Working in close partnership with the Pension Service is seen as a key driver to our success, and this was highlighted when the project was featured in a recent issue of Horizon – the DWP’s staff magazine. Locally, the Partnership Liaison Manager says that the good quality referrals we send have contributed to the Pension Service’s own successes. The figures they achieve are unheard of elsewhere in the country.

The people of St Helens are not the only ones to benefit. Thanks to the generosity of Performance Awards sponsors, Rossendale, we have been able to present a cheque for £250 to Willowbrook, a local hospice.

We haven’t stood still since we won the award. The take-up officers are even trying more innovative ways to encourage claimants to apply. At one time, we would write to...
potential applicants that had been identified from the DWP scans, enclosing an application form. Although we got a good result from this, we felt that a better approach would be to write to the customer, offering a home visit on a specific day. The take-up officers complete the claim form during the visit. This has proved a success, as claimants are much more at ease when in their own homes, and the documentary evidence needed to support the claim is nearly always to hand.

We are always looking at opportunities to develop new partnerships with organisations. We now have links with, among others, the Housebound Library Service, United Utilities (Vulnerable Customer Scheme) and the Council’s Self-Assessment section. This team quoted its work with us as a contributory factor to winning top honours for Innovation through Partnership at the annual Adult Social Care and Health Awards event.

We have developed a good working relationship with the Council’s Older Persons and Reablement Teams, and arrangements are in place for us to both receive and make referrals to the teams. Being invited to present a paper at the IRRV Benefits Conference in February 2008 was the highlight of my career. It gave me the opportunity to challenge my peers country-wide to go back to their authorities and use our ideas to increase benefit take-up.

After the presentation, we were inundated by delegates wanting more information and copies of our award submission. Since then many representatives from other councils have visited us to emulate our success.

The campaign has allowed us to touch the lives of many people. We have received an unprecedented number of personal thanks from individuals as well as earning the trust and respect of partner organisations. If we can make as much progress in the next five years as we have in the last one, then many more people will ‘feel the benefit’. Which in our opinion, is the ultimate in partnership working.

“Take-up officers are trying more innovative ways to encourage claimants to apply”
A report was published in late August by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that presents the findings from two phases of research from the ‘In and Out of Work Pilot Evaluation’.

The pilots focused on testing new processes to improve the service to customers who frequently move in, and out, of work, and have to deal with DWP for their out-of-work benefits, HMRC for tax credits and local authorities (LAs) for housing and council tax (CT) benefit. The pilots aimed to provide a single point of contact for customers, with information gathered and shared securely across organisations. This streamlined approach was designed to enable quicker payments to customers, giving them greater confidence to take-up work, particularly offers of short-term employment.

The research focused on exploring staff and customer views of the pilots. Key findings were:

- comparisons of customer experience pre and post pilot were positive, with 48% of out-of-work customers who had also made a pre-pilot claim stating that their benefits were sorted out more quickly in the pilot. Only 15% of customers said their processing time was worse;
- in the first phase of the research, 56% of customers agreed that having been through the out-of-work process they would be more likely to take up short-term work in the future. At phase two, 10% had actually taken up short-term work. Of these, half agreed that the ease of getting their benefits through the pilot had made them more likely to take short-term work;
- staff were largely positive about the out-of-work process, and buy-in to the pilot across organisations was strong;
- staff perceived improved clearance times for benefits, which was borne out by the evaluation, showing an average 15% reduction in times to process claims; and
- staff perceived the in-to-work process benefited customers by resolving tax credit claims more quickly and securing housing benefit run-on.

The research identified some areas to further improve the pilots’ effectiveness, which were:

- customers did not always return their forms to Jobcentre Plus;
- some customers expressed a preference to provide the information online or by telephone;
- there was a concern among some staff about the new process, and in particular the pilot needed to build trust between staff of different organisations to avoid duplicate information being captured; and
- some staff expressed concerns about the implications of a national rollout, such as the impact on their resources or workloads, and the report states that these will be taken on board during the planning stage for national roll-out.
of work’ project d success?

“The intention is that the majority of people of working age will no longer be on benefits for life”

GREEN REBATES
Over the past few years there has been much talk about green rebates and aligning them to the payment of CT, but nothing has actually been taken forward, despite consumer research undertaken by the Energy Saving Trust showing that CT rebates could act as a key trigger to encourage householders to install energy efficiency measures.

Following a review of the new rating system in 2007, the Northern Ireland Assembly is now actively looking at the possibility of introducing green rebates and has published a consultation paper that proposes some measures. A key theme to emerge from the 2007 review was that the rating system should prompt householders to act in a more environmentally responsible way, and that a rate rebate should be awarded to households that have installed energy efficiency measures in their homes, such as loft and cavity wall insulation.

The Northern Ireland Executive has decided to take forward this proposal on the basis that it aligns with its wider commitment to promote sustainable development. In doing so it is recognised that account must be taken of any existing schemes as it is important that any green rebate should result in additional consumer action, i.e. a green rebate should not fund activity that would have happened anyway. This provides the opportunity for working in partnership with an energy provider such as the Northern Ireland Electricity Energy, which already operates an ‘Insulation Cash-back Scheme’.

The Executive has also decided to grant an initial rate exemption (in effect a payment holiday for up to five years) to new homes that are assessed as zero carbon.

On a personal note, while I support the concept of green rebates for householders improving the energy efficiency of their homes, I am not sure that they should be aligned to the payment of the property tax. It seems to me that creating ‘green credits’ which could be set against energy bills directly would act as a greater incentive, as householders would see a direct reduction in their bills.

THE FUTURE OF WELFARE
‘No-one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility’ is a wide ranging consultation on the future of welfare. The Green Paper sets out plans for changing support and work incentives to try and create a system that rewards responsibility.

The intention is that the majority of people of working age (those who can work now or at some point in the future) and their families will no longer be on benefits for life. Greater choice and control over the support that is provided is also proposed.

One of the key elements of the proposals is the simplification of the benefits system (we have heard this one before!) and the reduction of unnecessary complexity. The consultation paper states that this must be a long-term goal, but recognizes it cannot be achieved overnight and sets out a series of proposals to accelerate progress, including:

- abolishing income support and therefore creating a system based around two benefits (Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)) when resources allow;
- seeking views on how carers and others receiving income support can be provided for within this structure;
- reducing the difference between existing rates of incapacity benefits and ESA; and
- changes to the contribution conditions for ESA and JSA.

A part of the simplification ideal is the longer term goal to introduce a single benefit for those of working age that would provide a simplified system of income-replacement benefits which would free staff from juggling the administration of different benefits, and give them more time to help customers understand their entitlements.

Such a system would be based more on individual need and less on the type of benefit received. But one has to wonder where housing benefit and CT benefit sits with this objective?  

Pat Doherty IRRV CPFA is an independent consultant and a Past President of the IRRV. If you wish to comment on anything in the article please email him at: pkd@pkdconsultancy.co.uk
For many people, dealing with government, especially when reporting changes in circumstance, requires having to repeat and verify the same information to numerous departments, agencies and sections of local authorities (LAs). Our customer research found that nearly half of UK citizens would value a more focused service and the other half would appreciate the government making it easier for them to find services.

Tell Us Once is a cross-government programme that looks into the feasibility of people being able to inform the government just once of a life-changing event, such as a birth or bereavement. We know, through our customer research, that people are often at their most vulnerable during these times so any help we can offer would be very welcome. A birth or death can directly impact on the amount and type of benefit people may receive from local or central government, for example, child tax credit, housing benefit or state pension.

The key stakeholders and those we are currently in partnership with, are:
- HM Revenue & Customs;
- local authorities;
- the Identity and Passport Service;
- the Cabinet Office;
- HM Treasury;
- the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency;
- the Department for Transport;
- Communities and Local Government;
- Improvement and Development Agency;
- the Local Government Association; and
- the Information Commissioner’s Office.

The aim of Tell Us Once isn’t to set up a new organisation, or to radically overhaul existing ones, but to fit in with existing processes. We are aiming to:
- re-use established infrastructure, such as IS and IT systems;
- recognise that staff skills already exist to deliver such a service, and provide additional development and support; and
- go where customers go and offer a choice of channels.

Protecting information is important to us to ensure people have confidence in us taking care of their personal information and that of the deceased. We have been working closely with our partners to ensure that all data will be shared in a secure way and we are currently looking at the legal aspects of this, including whether or not new legislation is needed.

It is also important to us that we can verify people’s identities as many people use the internet to access services. So when people access our service through the e-channel, we need to be sure they are who they say they are.

Our pilot schemes, which have tested aspects of the Tell Us Once service since the beginning of the year, have been taking place in Rotherham, Tameside, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Southwark. We have used the information they have provided to design a super pilot called ‘Pathfinder’. These sites and more LAs will eventually join the Pathfinder and offer a full Tell Us Once service.

Other LAs will contribute to the Pathfinder by allowing us to monitor their current processes, to work out the costs and benefits of introducing a Tell Us Once service.

There are two broad geographical regions in the North and South East that will be involved in the Pathfinder, which will cover more than two million people. The Pathfinder will start in early October 2008 and will offer a face-to-face and telephone service for people who would like to notify central and local government of a birth or death. We will also be offering an online service to enable people to notify the government of a death only.

At the moment, Tell Us Once is just a feasibility study and we are currently compiling a business case to submit to the government in April 2009. It will be based on all our findings to date including the level of customer demand for such a service, logistics, costs, risks and benefits. A decision will then be made by government as to whether or not to roll out the service nationally.

A presentation of the Tell Us Once agenda is being made at the forthcoming IRRV Annual Conference in Manchester. Visit www.irrv.net for further information.
Assessing case profiles for the most effective method of enforcement can be a real headache. We have developed the e-value report to quickly and efficiently identify all relevant data and provide you with our recommendation for the best recovery strategy on each case. And the great news is that it won’t hurt your pocket either. For more information on how the e-value report can save you time and increase recoveries, call 0845 404 1999 or to find out more about other products from Incasso, visit our website today.

www.incasso.co.uk
The transformational agenda envisages changing service delivery by utilising new technology. Revenues and benefits services across local government are already leaders in adopting new systems and management strategies, therefore it could be argued that revenues and benefits across the UK have already been largely transformed, and for many councils there is not much else that can be done.

In reality, there is always something to improve – if the technology is already in place, the next step may be to look at other ways of adding efficiency gains by changing work methods. This has been the approach in Basildon District Council, where transformation is not dependant on the introduction of more technology but is being achieved by a more efficient use of what is already in place.

The towns of Basildon, Billericay and Wickford (with a combined population of around 150,000) are covered by Basildon DC. For a district council, the volume of revenues and benefits activity is high, with 74,000 dwellings and a caseload of 16,500. Basildon itself has a busy town centre, therefore customer services must be prepared for a high volume of walk-in customers. The revenues and benefits service performs well, with collection rates for council tax in 2007/8 at 97.5% and new claims processing for housing benefits at 19 days. In both instances, there is scope for improvement.

**Lean Processing**

‘Lean thinking’ and ‘lean processing’ are terms that have been around in manufacturing for a considerable time, but are beginning to be heard in local government, as a way of organising an administration process. The principle of lean processing is that the organisation should engage in activities that ‘add value’ to the product and eliminate activities that do not. This means reducing the number of instances in which an activity is passed from one person to another, ‘one touch processing’, and adopting the principle of ‘right first time’. The effect that lean processing has on an organisation is a need for staff to be empowered to take decisions with less referral up the management chain, and that training must be maintained at a high level. For the organisation, this means removing some layers of management to create a flatter structure, but recognising where staff have been given more responsibility. In the lean environment there is a greater emphasis on teamwork, with the team owning the outcomes of the process and working together to achieve efficiencies rather than relying on instructions from above. Closely linked to this is the need for policies and procedures to be properly documented.

**Structural Change**

Change costs money – it may produce operational savings, but the payback period is an important consideration. At Basildon DC there was an advantage. The revenues and benefits service was due to relocate to the civic centre, where virtually all other departments are located, and the cost of relocation was to be recovered from savings in office
accommodation costs. Consequently, there was an opportunity for organisational restructuring without having to factor in the additional costs of the physical moves. By implementing organisational restructuring in conjunction with the office move, the relocation would pick up those costs.

With the restructure based on ‘lean’ principles, the first step was to assess the processes being undertaken. The analysis confirmed that the two front line services of local tax collection and benefits administration consisted of distinct and separate processes that relied on a common set of support services such as training, customer services, information systems, systems control and office administration. This determined the shape of Basildon DC’s restructure, with the creation of a support services section headed by a new post of Support Services Manager, leaving the Revenues and Benefits Managers to focus on operational management under the head of service.

Basildon DC recognised that staff are the most important resource. Good management is important, but the cost of 100 staff is by far the greatest investment. With the tools provided and the new technology that underpins transformation already in place, it was important for staff to feel empowered to do their jobs. This was achieved through new job descriptions and an extensive review of office procedures.

**RELOCATION**

In many organisations, the office culture is determined by location, with cellular offices or open plan space dictating how people relate to each other. This is a key factor, but one that is less under management control than anything else. At Basildon DC, the revenues and benefits service consisted mainly of closed offices in a separate building, away from the rest of the council’s administration. With the opportunity for relocation to the civic centre it was possible for the organisational restructure and for new seating plans to be implemented in conjunction with the removal project so that the disturbance was limited to a single occasion.

**THE PROGRESS SO FAR**

As of Autumn 2008, Basildon DC’s revenues and benefits service has moved into the newly refurbished, open plan accommodation. Seating arrangements reflect the fresh organisational structure. The service is supported by reliable application software for benefits, council tax, NDR and income, while EDRMS moves work around the sections, enabling minimal reliance on paper files. The back office functions are now strongly team-based, with large numbers of staff working in level teams. The previous pyramid management structure has been radically reduced and at least three senior posts have been filled from outside, bringing new expertise into the organisation. In the front office, specialist revenues and benefits advisors work alongside corporate customer services providing a civic centre one-stop-shop.

The changes have been achieved with no redundancies and many staff have received grading increases, which were paid for by an overall 10% reduction in staff numbers. A policy of not filling certain vacancies over the previous year eased assimilation into the new structure and people are beginning to settle into their new surroundings and roles. Having said that, it is still early days and the creation of policy and procedure manuals, is nearing completion.

A post implementation review is scheduled for 2009 and any aspects not performing will be reviewed. After change, things can never be the same so what matters is that change delivers, and for Basildon DC, it definitely has.

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Scott Logan IRRV is Revenues and Benefits Manager at Basildon District Council and Bill Lovell is an independent revenues consultant.
was casting my eyes over the screen on a grey spring day when suddenly a journalist on a popular network blog grabbed my attention. Prompted by the fine imposed on a Cumbrian man for overfilling his wheelie-bin, members of the public were being encouraged to share stories of councils wasting money.

Powerless to resist, I found myself engaged in a cyber debate, fuelled by anger towards the media, which seems reluctant to allow the truth to get in the way of a good story! I felt compelled to make the point that many younger people think nothing of spending £60 per night drinking, in and out of clubs/bars/taxis, etc. They maybe do that twice a week, in an average month spending over £500 on such activities, not forgetting the occasional £100 on a new outfit.

Those same people who complain bitterly about paying around £100 per month in council tax (CT) – money that helps ensure the clubs and bars at which they drink are safe and hygienic, regulates the taxis that ferry them around, frees the streets of the litter (and vomit) that they leave behind and funds the police force they call on if there is any trouble. The list goes on.

But what is so disappointing is that local authorities are clearly failing in their public relations work to explain how council tax does represent value for money. Such weak PR was illustrated by a call I took from a friend while writing this article. I explained how I was seeking to meet the editor’s deadline, to which he responded, “but local government don’t meet deadlines”, ouch!

Gershon and particularly Varney, have stimulated talk of partnership working and clichéd phrases such as ‘centralised back-office functions’ achieving ‘economies of scale’. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is, however, unsustainable. What works in one situation will not necessarily work in another.
The advantages of a holistic approach to revenues and benefits is evident but Sean Langley thinks that the ‘one size’ approach doesn’t necessarily fit all functions were the cure-all, outsourcing companies would have cleaned up a decade ago!

Sure, there have been success stories and, as I said to a CCT-fearing national conference in Eastbourne ten years ago, we should use the experience of the period to learn from the private sector.

Successful services should not be judged by how well they meet government targets, but by whether they actually deliver services that the public demand. Do you know whether they do? Perhaps more pertinently, do they?

It is abundantly clear to me that a holistic approach is the most likely way to achieve the highest quality revenues and benefits services to your residents. Not by number-crunching speed at the expense of quality! What I mean by holistic is a ‘rounded’ service that encompasses CT, business rates, housing and CT benefits, and fraud investigation.

Sean Langley is a writer and revenues and benefits specialist. Contact him at: esselle@madafish.com

Your starting point is the entire domestic and non-domestic property database. These house your residents and businesses – the lifeblood of your community. Residents and businesses are liable to pay CT and business rates, generating a portion of the income required to deliver local services. Those same properties and residents give rise to your benefits caseload and, ultimately, your fraudulent activity. The thread is implicit.

I am not talking about providing the cheapest service as quality has a price. And I am not talking about providing the fastest service as quality takes time. I am not even talking about providing an efficient service, as quality is not always clinical. What I am referring to is providing an effective service, because quality meets need.

To do this, you need to understand your market and your customers. This cannot be done remotely. In the same way that a good leader needs to get close to their staff, a good service needs to get close to its users.

A locally defined team delivering those services will prove more adept than a remote service team covering a wider region. First of all, the database of properties needs to be accurate and comprehensive. Local knowledge in this respect is essential. A local authority known to me was recently able to identify the liability for business rates on a small baker’s shop, simply because a staff member used it to buy lunch, engaging the proprietor in conversation to glean information. An example of where small is good – interest in, and ownership of the work leads to quality outcomes. Not something that would be likely if the business rates were administered by a larger operation some 50 miles away.

An accurate database facilitates more effective collection, but will also lead to more effective benefits administration. This can perhaps best be explained by considering the implications of a potential revaluation. We are told that in evaluation the intention would be that the total amount of CT raised, before benefits, would not increase. If it is likely that more properties would move up a band than down, then the average Band D tax should reduce accordingly. Given that most benefit claimants live in the lowest bands, reduced benefit expenditure would result. The thread is real.

The strategic importance of benefits is now huge. Although meeting public need is the fundamental yardstick for measuring service quality, ignore the emphasis that central government places on strategic goals at your peril. With the Audit Commission’s Key Lines of Enquiry searching out whether your benefits service links into a multitude of internal and external services, it now indicates to me that revenues and benefits is the most important service in local government. Failure is not an option.

The intrinsic link between the aforementioned group of services is further illustrated in areas where there are large or medium-sized employers. Some of these employers may find themselves in financial difficulties, struggling to meet their rate payments. If they employ a significant number of your council taxpayers, as an authority you may well be best served by taking a strategic decision to assist them out of the crisis. This would avoid catastrophes that may be created by their going out of business – such as their redundant employees finding it difficult to pay their own CT, increasing your arrears and having to claim benefits, placing heavier burdens on your already stretched resources. Those strategic decisions will best be made with a local finger on the community pulse.

The other major advantage of a holistic approach is intelligence pooling. A strong argument exists for creating a core enforcement team within your department, comprising fraud, benefit overpayments and local taxation recovery. Many debtors will be multiple debtors, whilst some will combine that with fraudulent activity. Merging your intelligence and resources will combat this to good effect.

In simple terms, a highly effective service will look at the bigger picture. A local service will look beyond just an outstanding bill. If it is CT, the authority will discuss the possibility of benefit entitlement to reduce it. If it is business rates it will consider the implications of that business closing before wading in to recover the money. But, if that is what proves necessary, the authority will have the data intelligence and resources to recover the sum in an appropriate way.

Our Chief Executive, David Magor, talks about the quality of revenue collection in this country being ‘world-class’ – quoting figures that the cost of collection here is 3% of the taxbase, whereas in the USA it is 7.83% with less successful results. Huge challenges have been responded to with many fresh ideas from the talent within our services. This talent could be drowned in large back-office functions cultivating crass inefficiencies in a desire to meet targets.

Perhaps the most naturally gifted footballer ever, George Best, blossomed in a terrific 1960s Manchester United team. He was ‘world class’ and then toiled in the morass of a poor team in the seventies, made worse by the fact that at international level he played for Northern Ireland, which had limited talent at its disposal. His dreams remained, for the large part, unrealised. Best struggled with this mediocrity and was prematurely lost to football.

The talent in revenues and benefits could go the same way if Varney wins the day at the expense of the holistic solution, where creative service delivery meets what the customer actually needs, as opposed to what is perceived as their need.
It’s time to unlock your potential

Liverpool Direct is the UK’s leading private-public sector partnership. We offer a full end-to-end debt recovery service including consultancy, contact centre management, processing and administration. We can help unlock your potential, freeing up time and cashflow so that you can focus on your customers. Working in partnership and building long term relationships is what we do best. Call us and see how we can help you.

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A different era

Things have certainly changed in local government offices since the days that General Rate books were actual books! Mike Commins takes a nostalgic look back at a less technical age.

But we are now in the modern age. Gone are the days of leather-bound volumes with coloured watermarks, to be replaced by loose-leaf sheets, punched with at least a dozen holes large enough to accommodate moderate sized nuts and bolts, to secure the pages to the heavy wooden spine and thick cardboard outer covers. The sheets had been previously printed with the name, address and rateable value details, by the technology of the day – the Adrema Addressograph Machine.

The operation of this machine was very much like driving a car. You sat at what looked like a solid metal steering wheel on which was a single arrow that pointed to the letters of the alphabet positioned around it. Rotating the steering wheel to point at a chosen letter while simultaneously pressing the right foot-pedal produced the indentation of the chosen letter onto a thin steel plate with raised edges. The left foot-pedal would produce a capital letter. The clatter of noise that these machines made when being operated at speed meant they had to be kept in a remote location, away from the main clerical staff, for fear of distraction. There were several thousand of these metal plates stored in metal tray-drawers that doubled up as hoppers for the printing process.

The rate book pages were then passed beneath the metal plate hopper on another machine and by judiciously pushing the rate book page up a notch to coincide with the foot pedal operation, the plate was released onto an ink ribbon to create a tidy listing of appropriate details. The rate bills were similarly processed, sheet-by-sheet, and then the laborious task of calculating the amounts due and writing up the rate books and bills could begin. This was the time of the year that we never relished, when the Rates Office was generally regarded as the backwater for the Treasurer’s Department, but the overtime pay did help!

Bear in mind that this same system was used to produce the periodical Sundry Debtor invoices (ground rents and the like), loan interest cheques, wage envelopes (many were paid weekly, in cash in those days) and also the Register of Electors.

In my next Insight article, I will delve into the works of the accountancy section of yesteryear... happy memories!
Public authorities are increasingly being asked to disclose information under the FOI Act. Ibrahim Hasan considers which requests can be held exempt from disclosure and what the public really should be entitled to find out.

Public authorities often receive requests for lists of information under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000. A common response to such requests is that the information is not held under the Act, because the public authority is not in possession of a physical list. Therefore, some public authorities have claimed that responding to such a request would involve the creation of new information, which the Act does not require.

In a recent Information Commissioner (ICO) decision involving the Cabinet Office, the complainant asked for a list of FOI requests made to the Cabinet Office, detailing the dates of the Cabinet Office’s responses, and whether the request resulted in full, partial or non-disclosure of information. The Cabinet Office responded that the information was not held, and argued that the process of gathering the requested information into a list would constitute “information creation”, which the Act does not require public authorities to undertake. The Commissioner disagreed and instructed the Cabinet Office to provide the complainant with the requested information or, should it estimate that by doing so would exceed the appropriate fees limit (£600), provide the complainant with an indication of what information can be provided within the appropriate limit.

Under section 3 of the Act, the requested information does not have to be disclosed if it is held on behalf of another party.

In Ennis McBride v Information Commissioner and the Ministry of Justice (formerly the Privy Council Office) (27 May 2008) the Tribunal ruled that whether or not a public authority holds information on behalf of another is simply a question of fact to be determined on the evidence. This case involved a request by a student to see his complaint file held by the Visitor to the University of London. This person had responsibility for dealing with university complaints, so the Ministry argued that the information was held on behalf of another. The Tribunal disagreed – it gave weight to the fact that in this case, the public authority managed and controlled the information, it was not a case of the information being simply on the authority’s premises.

Public authorities increasingly face FOI requests about how they deal with FOI requestors, which has concerned some information professionals because their often frank comments about requestors (and how to deal with them) may be disclosed. Section 36 provides a possible exemption. Subsection (2)(b) allows information to be withheld if, in the reasonable opinion of the qualified person, disclosure:

- would, or would be likely to, inhibit:
  - (i) the free and frank provision of advice; or
  - (ii) the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation.

On 30 June 2008, the Home Office claimed this exemption when a complainant requested documents relating to internal communications and his company’s use of FOI. The Home Office was so reluctant to release this information, even to the ICO, that the latter had to serve an Information Notice. Having assessed the information, the Commissioner found that section 36 was engaged but ruled that, in this instance, public interest favoured disclosure. In reaching this decision, the Commissioner considered the seriousness, extent and frequency of the prejudice if the information was disclosed. He rejected the Home Office’s argument that disclosure in this case would make officials less likely to perform their duties properly. He also considered that, in this case, the timing of the request was important. At the time of the request, all the complainant’s FOI requests to the Home Office had been resolved one way or the other. He therefore did not consider that, in this case, disclosure would be circumventing the normal FOI review procedure.Disclosure could have the positive effect of increasing the complainant and the public’s confidence in the robustness of the Home Office’s internal FOI request procedures.

“Under section 3 of the Act, the requested information does not have to be disclosed if it is held on behalf of another party.”
Ibrahim Hasan is a director of Act Now Training and a consultant with IBA Solicitors. He produces a fortnightly freedom of information podcast reviewing all the latest FOI decisions which can be downloaded from his website: www.informationlaw.org.uk

The long running saga of MPs’ expenses finally came to a head in June when the High Court upheld the Information Tribunal’s decision of 26 February 2008 to require MPs to disclose much more detail about how they spend their £22,000 second-home allowance, which is now the famous case of the John Lewis List; Corporate Officer of the House of Commons v (1) The Information Commissioner (2) Heather Brooke (3) Ben Leapman (4) Jonathan Michael Ungoed-Thomas [2008] EWHC 1084 (Admin).

The High Court agreed with the Tribunal and the Commissioner that the public had a right to know the information, and that the MPs’ expectations of privacy were unreasonable. It also upheld a decision by the Information Tribunal that MPs’ private addresses should be made public as part of the disclosures, arguing that they were “not very private at all”. It pointed out that MPs’ addresses were already disclosed when they sought nomination for election, that company directors had to provide a residential address, and that everybody’s full addresses are recorded in local libraries or town halls. The Information Tribunal had already concluded that MPs could keep their addresses secret if they had a “special security reason”, for example, “a problem with a stalker or other criminal threat”.

Another interesting Tribunal decision which sheds more light on this issue is Anthony Turcotte v Information Commissioner and London Borough of Camden (12 June 2008). The appellant challenged the council’s decision to disclose addresses of a housing association’s properties. It had removed house and flat numbers on grounds of personal data (section 40), and argued that to disclose the full addresses of the properties – when taken with electoral role information – would allow individual occupiers to be identified. Because the qualification criteria for housing included homelessness or significant housing needs, the data would permit individuals to be identified as part of a distinct, and potentially vulnerable, group. The Commissioner agreed with this approach.

This decision is in line with previous decisions which stated that while private addresses could be disclosed, any which are occupied by vulnerable groups, can be withheld e.g. Braintree District Council (3 January 2007) and Mid Devon District Council (4 May 2006), which concerned requests for detail of council tenants.
Recovery powers

The use of civil court procedures to collect non-domestic rates is an efficient method of enforcement which could benefit all types of collection. Paul Russell reports

It seems strange to me that the broad range of recovery powers available to non-domestic rate (NDR) collectors is largely unused.

Enforcement of the collection of council tax is only possible by application for a liability order (LO) in a magistrates’ court, and the consequential powers to attach earnings or members’ allowances, deduct from benefits, seek a charging order, undertake insolvency proceedings, or levy distress, etc., are available. This restricts English and Welsh local authorities to being able to enforce solely in England and Wales, not in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, Channel Islands, etc., and certainly not in the European Union (EU), let alone outside Europe. Thus any taxpayers who move outside England and Wales, while owing council tax arrears, cannot be compelled to pay up.

However, NDR is very different, as the civil courts are available and give huge powers of recovery.

Traditionally, non-domestic rate collectors seek to recover arrears through magistrates’ courts, applying for liability orders. In most cases this
process results in collecting the arrears (where they are able to be recovered).

However, there appears to be a significant number of cases where non-domestic rates cannot be enforced through the medium of a liability order and distress or bankruptcy/winding-up. This may be because no goods can be found upon which to levy or because the ratepayer is either an individual living, or a company registered, outside of England and Wales.

By way of example, a ratepayer which is an advertising company registered and carrying on business in, say, the Netherlands, and which is rated with respect to hundreds of advertising hoardings, cannot be forced to pay by way of a LO.

Also, since unoccupied qualifying industrial hereditaments came into the 100% charge from 1 April 2008, owners situated outside of England and Wales cannot be forced to pay under a LO.

The traditional use of the magistrates’ courts must surely be open to question for certain classes of ratepayer. The automatic process of application for a liability order, when in default of payment, should be examined in order to ascertain whether or not it would be better to utilise the remedies available through the civil courts (the county or the High Court). Colleagues involved in sundry debt collection will already be very familiar with the remedies available through the civil courts.

Regulations 10(2) and 20 of the Non-Domestic Rating (Collection and Enforcement) Regulations 1989 allow recovery of business rates in a ‘court of competent jurisdiction’ (meaning the county courts or the High Court). This method of recovery is specifically an alternative to applying for a liability order. Thus, once a liability order has been obtained, commencement of proceedings in the county/High Court, other than insolvency, cannot take place.

While some of the powers available under a liability order can be exercised speedily, as they are summary powers of the local authority, these are limited to the use of distress or insolvency. If experience proves that distress is ineffective, then it could be worth considering ignoring the Magistrates’ Courts and, instead, making a claim in the civil courts for subsequent years.

The advantages of taking an NDR recovery into the civil courts are twofold: the remedies available are much wider in scope, and claims can be pursued outside England and Wales, including the areas of Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, Gibraltar, France, the Netherlands, and even Argentina, China and the Russian Federation.

The remedies available in England and Wales, when judgement is given in the civil courts, include execution (similar to distress), charging orders, third party debt orders (used to be called garnishee orders), attachment of earnings orders (AEOs), as well as insolvency and even committal to prison. In addition, the debtor can be brought before the court to give a detailed account of their finances, including income and assets, etc., by the process of an order to obtain information (used to be called an oral examination).

Third party debt orders, for example, can be sought when, following the obtaining of a judgement of the debt, the creditor becomes aware that another person owes the debtor a sum of money. This may be, for example, trade creditors of the debtor. Once the information is available, the simple preparation and filing of an affidavit into court will cause the court to issue a summons against the third party. The third party may then pay the sum into court, or challenge the application on the basis that he is not indebted to the judgement debtor. If the third party fails to respond, the court can make an order against them, which is enforced in much the same way as if that person were the original judgement debtor.

While each of these methods of recovery is significantly more time consuming and expensive than making an application for a liability order in magistrates’ courts, the fees and costs involved, together with interest on the debts, are recoverable through the processes. Additionally, as most claims go undefended, most of the process is done by post.

Enforcement of claims outside England and Wales is covered by a range of provisions and conventions including the Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments Act 1982, the Hague Convention of 1965, and within the EU under article 244 or 256 of the Treaty establishing the European Community; the Brussels and Lugano Conventions, and Council Regulation (EC) No 1348/2000, and including by obtaining a “Community Judgment”.

In theory at least, it is possible to enforce payment in almost any country of the world, as most are signatories to the Hague Convention of 1965, hence my examples of China and the Russian Federation, above.

Clearly smaller debts may well not be economic to seek to collect by way of the civil courts, especially those outside the EU, as there is undoubtedly a high risk of non-recovery. However, the duty which all billing authorities owe to the NDR Pool requires that cases where L0s prove impotent should give rise to a different approach by way of using the civil courts.

It is a pity that the civil court procedures are not available for council tax debts, as there are many taxpayers who are able to escape payment by living in Scotland or Northern Ireland, etc. But at least the procedures are available for collection of NDR. It is also a pity that the civil court procedure is only available before seeking a LO, as it is often only realised that an LO is impotent after the event. Maybe local authorities will get the hinted-at power to transfer a LO into the civil courts for enforcement purposes, which would solve some of the problems.

In the meantime, while there is never an easy answer to collecting the more difficult debts, powerful tools are available for collection and enforcement, and these should be explored in appropriate cases.

“It is a pity that the civil court procedures are not available for council tax debts”
When a plan backfires

A lot of work goes into the annual conference, and advanced preparations do not always go smoothly, as Kate Miller has discovered

“It’s really hard to know in August what you’re going to want to say at the beginning of October”

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane, Costleigh Feese Management Consultancy
Hi Ben. Hope you are well. We need the abstract for your conference paper very soon – by the end of the week at the latest. Please give us a ring if there are any problems.

From: Ben Brightley-Keane, Revenues Performance Enhancement Consultant, Costleigh Feese Management Consultancy
To: IRRV Conference Team
Absolutely no problems, none at all! Really looking forward to giving this paper. It requires a lot of very detailed preparation though. Not sure I can get it to you for the end of the week…or the end of the month really.

The thing is, it’s really hard to know in August what you’re going to want to say at the beginning of October when there are so many unknowns – the inflation figures, the price of oil, the exchange rate against the dollar, how many medals Great Britain will win in Beijing, who’s going to be topping the Premier League – and those are just some of the known unknowns, let alone the unknown unknowns!

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
The best thing is to stick to your topic: ‘Improving accuracy in the benefits service’. You probably won’t need to refer to all the other things.

From: Ben Brightley-Keane
To: IRRV Conference Team
Well I might, you see. For my jokes. I really want to get this conference paper right. I’ve only just joined Costleigh Feese from the DCLG and I want to make an impression.

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
Don’t worry about jokes. Yours is one of the afternoon ‘fringe’ sessions – they’re very practical. People go along to learn and ask questions.

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
Questions? What sort of questions? Do I have to answer on the spot?
At the DCLG we always took weeks to respond to questions, and by the time we did answer them, people had forgotten what they had asked. Suppose someone asks something terribly detailed about the benefit regulations?? Suppose hyfjgggaah ohuh

From: Ben Brightley-Keane
To: IRRV Conference Team
Gyugklowrbvc think I’m having a panic attack yghfsoujkanbeu

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
OK Ben. Breathe deeply. Breathe. In for a count of six, out for a count of eight, in for a count of six, out for a count of eight… that’s it.

From: Ben Brightley-Keane
To: IRRV Conference Team
Aafhgaaou uhhgh aaa… that’s better. Thank you.

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
Not at all.

From: Ben Brightley-Keane
To: IRRV Conference Team
Oh no, I can’t do this. You’d better find a replacement speaker. I’ve always been hopeless at public speaking. Ever since third year juniors when I fluffed my show-and-tell on the lifecycle of the frog and Mrs Bagley had to call the RSPCA to collect up all the tadpoles – and then there was the first time at the DCLG I used an overhead slide projector, and they all sat there sniggering while I gave my presentation on ‘ygetarts gnigrach ytirohtua lacol a’.

From: IRRV Conference Team
To: Ben Brightley-Keane
You can do this Ben. Don’t let us down. It’s perfectly easy to present your slides using a laptop, and as long as you avoid the use of live animals you’ll be fine.

From: Ben Brightley-Keane
To: IRRV Conference Team
Yes. OK. Thank you for your support. I suppose you’re right about the live animals too. I had intended to demonstrate my ideas on ‘improving performance via targeted reward’ with the help of my pet rat Sarkozy, but perhaps I’ll leave that for another time. Maybe the Benefits Conference?

Kate Miller is a freelance writer
www.flintsparkwriting.co.uk
HB/CTB Law and Administration

Author: Tracy Crowe IRRV CPFA

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