The good news keeps on coming

The effectiveness of compliance following the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act is good news all round, says James Mckillop.
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**Features**

Cover story

**The good news keeps on coming!**
The effectiveness of compliance following the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act is good news all round, says James Mckillop

Special report

**Positive response to the 2016/17 FERIS design**

Insight, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, presents a special report on the Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme

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Editor’s welcome

“Welcome to the April edition of Insight.”

By the time our latest edition hits your desk or your screen, those of you in local government will have negotiated (hopefully successfully!) yet another ‘year end’ and many of you in the valuation profession will be less than twelve months away from the effective date of a non-domestic rate revaluation.

If you’re a member reading this who feels that I have not covered your role, the chances are you will still be very busy. That’s why we aim to continue as in previous issues, with cutting edge comment from key practitioners and a host of other authors willing to impart their knowledge and expertise to ensure your working life runs as smoothly as possible.

This month, key Institute partners Rossendales are on hand to offer opinion on the state of the enforcement industry as it emerges from the first major changes for many a year – and there’s a bit of good news in there. In another issue which celebrates the diversity of the IRRV, we range from Paul Sanderson’s regular feature chronicling global valuation practice through to a groundbreaking innovation described by Andrew Stevens which brings the concept of ‘x-ray specs’ into the realms of reality! In between, we offer more up to date analysis of new legal precedents, contributions from the centre in the form of the Valuation Office Agency and the Department for Work and Pensions, and a newcomer to the ‘Viewpoint’ column – Policy in Practice’s Deven Ghelani.

All the regulars are in there too, so all that remains is for me to wish you a Happy New Financial Year – read on and enjoy!

John Roberts IRRV (Hons) is Managing Editor of the Institute’s magazines

A message from the Deputy Chief Executive.

Log in to ‘magazines’ in the member area of www.irrv.net to hear the message online.

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• the IRRV and O2 team up to tackle resource management
• Mel Poluck returns with more examples of technology at work
• the road to examination success is charted by Matthew Ward.
**Non-Domestic Rate: The Rating List: How To Ensure it is Accurate (Fee 1)**

7 July: Hinckley • 11 July: Bradford • 15 July: Manchester • 21 July: London • 26 July: Bristol

In the past two years, the Institute has run a number of Professional Meetings in partnership with the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). The role of the billing authority [and that of the rating officer] has changed since the 1st April 2013 and no longer is a high collection rate the major goal. The billing authority now has a direct interest in ensuring they have an accurate [and up to date] rating list whilst they also look to maximise growth and predict potential changes to the rate base. At the same time, elected members are looking to attract and retain business. This latest series of meetings run in partnership with the VOA will focus on the VOA’s and billing authority’s responsibilities in relation to the rating list which will include looking at the ‘powers’ and ‘duties’ of both parties. The role of the billing authority in inspections, reporting, administering reliefs and collection will all be covered. Maintaining a strong relationship between the billing authority and the VOA will be a key theme for the day. The programme will incorporate a series of workshops, enabling delegates to share good practice and identify what is working well and what is not working so well.

The meetings will be delivered by Gary Watson IRRV (Hons), Deputy Chief Executive, IRRV together with representatives from the VOA. (Note: As numbers at any one meeting are limited to 20, early booking is recommended)

**Non-Domestic Rate: Administration of Reliefs and Service of Completion Notices (Fee 1)**

20 April: Bristol • 25 April: Bradford • 5 May: Hinckley • 19 May: London • 10 June: Manchester

This series of workshops will be of interest to all practitioners, of any level, working within the rates office of a billing authority. They will focus on a billing authority’s discretionary power for awarding relief [i.e. discretionary, part-occupied and hardship] together with the procedures for serving completion notices. Although the general powers for awarding relief and serving completion notices will be covered, the focus of the day will be on the documentation used by billing authorities; this includes the application forms / notices sent and the policies and guidelines which may exist. There will be a series of case studies incorporated throughout the day; designed to address the different interpretation of legislation that has become increasingly apparent in recent years. The ultimate aim of these workshops is to ensure a billing authority is complying with the law and to establish ‘good practice’ in the service and design of forms and notices, as well as the contents of any policies or guidelines.

The course will be delivered by Gary Watson IRRV (Hons), Deputy Chief Executive. (Note: As numbers at any one meeting are limited to 20, early booking is recommended)

**Dealing with Vulnerability in a Revenues Environment* (Fee 2)**

12 April: London • 15 April: Manchester

The aim of this professional meeting is to provide an overview of the requirements to address vulnerability in collecting revenues, both statutory and advisory; to assist delegates in understanding the differing types of vulnerable person including medical terminology and behaviours and to assist delegates in their dealings, negotiations and information gathering. By the end of this course, participants will have gained increased knowledge with an overview of: vulnerability and how collection staff should approach assess and assist in sensitive situations; the statutory requirements to identify and engage with the vulnerable; the advisory requirements to identify and engage with the vulnerable; the different definitions of vulnerability; the characteristics and conditions of vulnerability; mental capacity and mental health problems and signposting the various partner agencies that can assist with vulnerable people. Learning Outcomes will include: increased awareness of the various types, conditions and characteristics of vulnerability; knowledge of the legal requirements to deal with vulnerability within a Revenues environment including Data Protection implications; an appreciation of differing approaches and techniques to assess and assist in dealing with the vulnerable and how to handle difficult situations involving the vulnerable and where to get help and assistance.

This will be delivered by Dave Chapman FIRRV, Group Client Services Director, Rossendale. (Note: As numbers at any one meeting are limited to 20, early booking is recommended)

* The special offer does not apply to the ‘Dealing with Vulnerability in a Revenues Environment’.

** This special offer will only be made available to IRRV Members and Forum, Benefit Advisory or Organisational Members. However, it can be combined across both eligible meetings and will apply if the same persons are attending both events. Delegates must be from the same organisation and bookings must be made at the same time.

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E: conference@irrv.org.uk
T: 020 7691 8987

www.irrv.net/conferences
My journey to work was on my bicycle and I spent the time cycling in and dreaming of an improvement in Watford’s progress in the lower echelons of the Football League. Little did I know my mind was to be filled with critical information that gave a whole new meaning to my journey to work!

The Chief Rating Officer was a stalwart of the then Rating and Valuation Association. His name was Harry Faulkner, and he regarded the loss of a penny of rate income as a personal disaster, but he had a new weapon at his disposal in his fight to protect the rate income of the Burghers of the Council. That weapon was me and my bicycle! As well as being responsible for posting by hand all the rate income into the rate books, I was also to be the eyes and ears of the Rates Department as the new Rate Inspector. My crash course on rateable occupation was intense. I became an overnight expert and those initial instructions and knowledge gathering are still with me today.

You may well be asking what this episode in the life of the Chief Executive has to do with this editorial. Well, quite simply I am becoming increasingly concerned at the liberal and misinformed interpretation of rateable occupation in the courts. Equally, I am finding it hard to understand the ethical tone of some of the decisions, particularly when interpretations of the facts become so distorted that they condone some of the practices that rather stretch the four basic ingredients of rateable occupation.

This editorial will be published after, hopefully, we have received the conclusions of the Rating Review. Whatever views we have on the current wave of lawful rate avoidance, the reality is that the government have to do something about it. We might see extreme solutions, which on the one hand could be the abolition of the levy on empty property or on the other might be the abolition of empty relief and the introduction of a continuous levy, irrespective of whether the property is occupied or not.

Let us hope common sense prevails. The fresh thinking should start in the courts, with the application of sound legal interpretation, rather than some of the ‘interesting’ views being expressed in recent judgements.

“Equally, I am finding it hard to understand the ethical tone of some of the decisions, particularly when interpretations of the facts become so distorted that they condone some of the practices that rather stretch the four basic ingredients of rateable occupation.”

David Magor OBE IRRV (Hons) is Chief Executive of the Institute
Reval 2017: using the Valuation Office Agency’s online services

The Valuation Office Agency is reporting that ‘Reval’ is on track and the Agency is now encouraging ratepayers to visit www.gov.uk/voa/revaluation and register their email details with them.

They will then send a return email when the draft rateable values are available online in October 2016, telling ratepayers where they can find them, and other information on the revaluation.

Late news

JBW Group wins Islington LB Council contract and further expands their revenues sector service offering

Key Institute partners JBW Group has been selected to provide enforcement services for Islington London Borough’s revenues service.

The organisation has already been working with the authority’s parking service since 2012. The contract will run for two years, with potential extensions of up to a further two.

Business Development Director with JBW, Institute member David Graaff, commented, “We are very pleased to expand our relationship with Islington. We are outperforming the other panel members on collections in most of our contracts, and look forward to achieving the same in Islington.”

The cowboys are being rounded up!

The Insolvency Service has recently ordered two companies into liquidation for misleading small businesses over business rate ‘savings’.

Harrison Black Associates Ltd and Hayden Moss Associates Ltd were ordered into liquidation by the High Court on 1st March for misleading almost 100 small businesses into paying for services to challenge business rate valuations.

The winding-up of the two companies follows an investigation by the Service, which found the companies’ agents told prospective clients they were likely to be successful in obtaining a business rate revaluation of their premises. The investigation found clients were required to pay an upfront fee ranging from £495 plus VAT to £2,500 plus VAT, and were promised that a professional survey of their premises would be undertaken to support the business rate valuation appeal.

Between May 2014 and June 2015, at least 91 businesses signed agreements with the companies. There was no evidence to show that Harrison and Hayden were ever successful in obtaining a positive business rate revaluation for a client and few clients were ever visited by a surveyor acting for the companies.

Pension deficit costs declared valid costs expenditure

In the recent High Court case of Edward Williams v East Northamptonshire District Council, the Court found in favour of the authority, which had been questioned about the legitimacy of including pension deficit costs in the calculation of liability order costs of £75. The appellant’s Case Stated approach was dismissed, and the authority was awarded costs of £10,000. The full judgment can be viewed on the institute’s website.

Rate rebate replacement in Northern Ireland

The Department of Finance in Northern Ireland has developed a new simpler rate rebate policy, which adopts a new assessment mechanism for working age claimants, in order to align with the Executive’s plans for the introduction of Universal Credit (UC).

The scheme is scheduled to begin in autumn 2016. The proposed policy solution for the new DFP Rate Rebate (RR) Replacement scheme will rely on UC award notice information, with an earnings disregard and 10% taper, as consulted on previously. Full details can be viewed on https://www.dfpni.gov.uk/articles/latest-developments-rating-policy

News of members

A fresh start...

Congratulations are on offer to our immediate Past President, Kevin Stewart, who has recently started in a new role as Local Taxation and Benefits Manager with Wealden District Council.

We also offer congratulations to Debbie Greenwood, who has joined the Business Development and Client Services team.

Management team of enforcement industry specialists Jacobs.

Last but not least, Insight is delighted to report that our own Chief Executive, David Magor, has been awarded Honorary Membership status with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy – congratulations, David!

Association news

Lancashire and Cheshire Association goes medieval!

This year’s Lancashire and Cheshire AGM will be held at Lancaster Castle on 22nd April, with guest speaker IRRV President Jim McCafferty.

In addition to the formal proceedings, attendees can enjoy an interesting and informative tour of the Castle, which dates back to the 12th century. Following the tour, there will be a lunch at the nearby Merchants 1688 restaurant and bar, which is set in former wine cellars which, as the name suggests, date back to 1688.

Editor’s note – Association events are detailed on the Institute’s website, where every Association has its own page. Why not check out events in your area and get involved!
Dear reader,

Well, the bills will have gone out and for English councils what can I say about the DCLG – last minute or what? Well done to all everywhere who once again have brought a complex operation to a successful conclusion. Now the phone calls etc start...

Yet another Budget will have taken place by the time you read this. I just have one question here. Can councils take any more of burdens being shifted upon them whilst experiencing cuts in funding? In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament Research Centre suggests that at least the council tax freeze is actually ‘overfunded’. I will make no comment on this and leave it to people to draw their own conclusions on why this research is appearing now.

Leicester still top – thought I would get that out of my system first! Hearts are still doing well and, most important of the lot, Scotland on a winning run and even going to the trouble of helping our neighbour.

I still seem to have set up residence in my car and I continue to see more of Leicester in the last few months than I have in the previous 20 years. My travels, as well as taking me to West Lancashire on a regular basis, where I am doing some work, have taken me to London and Haydock Park. I was in London for the CIPFA annual dinner at the Intercontinental Hotel on Park Lane, so I had a wee wander along Park Lane and looked at the Aston Martin showroom. I can look, can’t I? It seems that, despite my pre-set ideas, there is a great deal of innovation and original thought in the world of public service accountancy. The guest speaker at the event, Isabel Hardman of The Spectator, gave a very interesting and thought-provoking talk on the ‘Europe’ referendum. I hope there will be many more intelligent debates to be heard on the subject before the vote.

I had a wonderful night at the Lancashire and Cheshire Association Dinner Dance at the Mercure Hotel at Haydock Park. The Association is a very active and well run body. More unusually, I think they really understand the symbiotic nature between Associations and IRRV HQ, no better illustrated than the fact that they send delegates to national events, which in these straitened times is good for everyone – not least the delegates themselves.

One thing that does trouble me about my time in Lancashire is that I have yet to experience the delights of a Lancashire Hotpot – have they become extinct? Does nobody know how to make them any more? I can see that I am going to have to get the ingredients myself and have a bash at Easter. Maybe there is a business opportunity there to reintroduce them to Lancashire?

Oh yes – off to see The Boss on his River Tour in June at Hampden Park. I saw it the first time round. My, how time flies... but Bruce seems to have changed less than the rest of us! Anyway, until next time, take care.

All the best, Jim
The work cycle has an annual rhythm, as many local government officers know only too well. Similarly, the Institute has its annual round of events. Following the annual membership subscription renewals mailings at the end of the calendar year, we deal with the returns from that process at the turn of the New Year. Membership enrolments and lapses continue throughout the year, of course, and the Institute Council keeps a watchful eye on membership movements and the implications for the Institute as a whole.

Major meetings follow an annual round, and they include IRRV Council and Committee meetings (four times a year). The Qualifications Management Board (the former Examining Board and N/SVQ Committee) meets six times a year, with two rounds per examination session and two meetings per session for preparation of papers and one for moderation and approval of results. Over all its meetings, it reviews vocational qualifications, examinations and qualifications policy and practice in general.

The examinations themselves take place in June and December, so examinations work is always with us before and after each session. This work takes the form of preparation of papers, administration of entries and centres, and oversight and direction of marking, moderation and results.

Courses still tend to follow a traditional pattern, commencing in autumn, continuing through to the early summer and ending in time for the June examinations. However, the modular structure of the examinations now means that students do not necessarily have to study all subjects concurrently, but prepare them for perhaps two subjects at a time. This is the model of the Scottish day release course, and enables students to focus more on specific topics as required. Distance learning students are free of the constraints of day release, but face other challenges in organising their own study time.

Along with describing good practice and outlining the kind of skills and knowledge that practitioners should possess, the document also describes the uses to which NOS can be put – including support for workforce management and quality control. The key aspect of the NOS is that they underpin our qualifications, which are vocationally related and apply to workplace activity.

The future of the NOS work that UKCES oversees is still under discussion, with the hope that it will be continued via the devolved administrations. It is also worth noting that Investors in People (IiP) has, according to UKCES, ‘a sustainable business model’ and its operations will carry on as normal. UKCES is in discussions with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills about options for the long term future of IiP. This is, one hopes, an encouraging sign for those employers who hold IiP status.

Michael Hopkins is the Institute’s Qualifications Manager. Contact him on michael.hopkins@irrv.org.uk or 020 7691 8978.
The Executive Committee next met at Hemmans Hotel, 64 Cheapside in the City of London on 11th February, with Mr W P Hunter in the chair. Minutes from the previous meeting were read and signed. The Secretary reported the election of the following officers, which had taken place at the annual meeting on 28th January:

- Mr W P Hunter: Chairman
- Mr J B Malby: Vice Chairman
- Mr T Rust: Honorary Treasurer
- Mr A White: Honorary Secretary
- Messrs Croxford and Thomas: Auditors.

The Secretary went on to report that 113 members and friends had sat down for the 17th annual dinner and that everything passed off satisfactorily. Vouchers for the expenditure incurred were submitted by him. It was resolved on the motion of Mr Westwood and seconded by Mr Warren:

“That the thanks of this Committee be accorded to the Secretary for the manner in which he carried out the detailed work connected with the annual dinner.”

A letter from Sir Hugh Owen KCB was then presented and read by the Secretary, where he replied to the resolution of congratulations passed at the annual meeting.

A letter from Sir Hugh Owen KCB was then presented and read by the Secretary, where he replied to the resolution of congratulations passed at the annual meeting.

Mr Robinson (Tooting) then proceeded to draw the attention of the meeting to the subject referred to upon the agenda over his liability to write the rate book of his district under the provisions of The Vestries Act 1850. Mr Robinson also read an advertisement connected with the vacant post of vestry clerk of his parish.

The Chairman stated that he had carefully considered the question, together with the Act of Parliament that was still un-repealed. Mr Robinson had to a great extent established a precedent by assisting in the work.

Committee resolved that the matter be postponed, until such time as the vestry clerkship of Tooting had filled up and that Mr Robinson reports back in due course.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman stated that it should be necessary, counsel’s opinion should be taken for Mr Robinson. In the meantime, it was resolved that Mr Robinson be requested to represent the district of Tooting upon the Executive Committee of this Association.

Moving on, it was resolved that the Secretary procure sufficient copies of the Bill relating to London Government that was about to be introduced by the Rt. Hon. A J Balfour MP, and to supply each member of the Committee with a copy. If necessary, a special meeting, to consider the same, would be called.

The Rt. Hon. A J Balfour MP entered Parliament in 1874 and served as Prime Minister of a Conservative government from July 1902 to December 1905. Having resigned as Prime Minister, the conservatives suffered a landslide defeat in January 1903, although he continued to lead the party until late 1911. The first president of the International Lawn Tennis Club of Great Britain, he originated an argument against believing that human reason could determine truth and was attributed the remark “nothing matters very much and few things matter at all.”

Mr Warren of Fulham then read lengthened correspondence which had taken place between himself and Sir Chas Dicke and Mr Hayes Fisher, relating to the subject of superannuation. It was resolved that if the thanks of this meeting be tendered to Mr Warren for the great interest he had taken with regard to the superannuation question.

It was then resolved that a sum of ten guineas be paid to the Honorary Secretary towards defraying the expenses of clerical assistance during the past two years and that he be requested to continue to obtain such assistance as may be required in the future.

Finally, it was resolved that consideration of the Royal Commission report on Valuation and Collection of Rates be postponed and that the Secretary sends a copy to each member of the Executive.

A cordial vote of thanks having been passed to the Chairman for the able and impartial conduct in the chair, the meeting then closed.
Did you hear that phrase describing the Hatton Garden burglars as ‘analogue thinkers, operating in a digital age’? Is anyone in our profession, with a CV line about ‘setting up the poll tax’, at risk of not grasping the digital era? No!

For all of its sins, poll tax preparation almost 30 years ago dragged us out of the days of Tolstoy depth General Rate ledgers. We set up barcoding for canvas returns and IT systems for direct input, replacing rate books and ‘data prep’. Decades ago, we replaced microfilm with document management. The digital progression by IRRV types since 1988 has been faster than Bolt.

Even I have saluted this phenomenon. Recently, when I fixed a brake light on my daughter’s old Corsa, I didn’t refer to the manual. I browsed for a short film on how to do it on YouTube. Success gave me the persona as ‘Super Light man, saviour of the Jalopy cluster’!

Let’s acknowledge the new frontiers explored by revenues practitioners of all ages. These IT-based horizons have been well chosen. There is no example I can think of in revenues where vast sums of money have been wasted on systems that didn’t work.

Those who have invested in ‘My Account’ systems, inviting self service for e-billing, direct debits, online claiming, as well as a portal to a wide range of council information, transactions and services, might be wondering where to go next. I mean, apart from the obvious increase in take-up of these services, which will further maximise collection and decrease costs. Potentially, this digital window is a whole new platform to inform customers about the value they get from their council tax. The dull pie chart information of the old leaflets is ‘so analogue’.

Bill payers might not appreciate that having their bin emptied is worth at least £20 a week. Some short films about the refuse service, schools, elderly care, parks and leisure centres etc., will reveal to your customers the value of that £1,000 annual (e-) bill. This could be one of the new frontiers to properly explain the fantastic deal customers get for their council tax money. An unmissable opportunity while your customers are logged in.

The government, often critical of the way that councils lurch towards increasing council tax, has also made progress. Agencies delivering car tax (DVLA) and self-assessment (HMRC) have done well. However, this lacks consistency – the Commons administration committee has announced plans to move from vellum to archival paper!

Hatton Garden? On that pre-analogue note, it may be time to get your Hatton coat...

Have our digital thinkers made the future safe? Andy Burton is not so sure.

Andy Burton can be contacted on andyrichburton@gmail.com
Something of a shot in the dark...

The Institute has dealt with several consultations concerning revenues matters over the last couple of months. These include the response to the provisional local government finance settlement 2016/17 in England and the review of the non-domestic rating system in Northern Ireland. The full responses can be found on the IRRV website.

The focus this month is the response to the Parliamentary CLG Committee’s Inquiry into the government’s proposals to allow local authorities to retain 100% of the full stock of business rates by 2020, to cut business rates and for directly elected mayors to add a premium to business rates to pay for new infrastructure. The Institute’s submission was of sufficient interest to the Committee to secure an invitation to give oral evidence to the Committee. At the time of writing that evidence session is yet to be held.

Because there is so little detail to consider in respect of the business rates proposals at this stage, it is difficult to make judgements about their impact. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the local government funding settlement arrangements are very unclear – and these fuller funding arrangements would need to be taken into account when considering any proposals relating specifically to business rates.

There are significant uncertainties about what funding will look like beyond the next financial year, or what local government funding will look like once the main grant is phased out and several other radical changes (such as the changed parameters for New Homes Bonus payments) are yet to be bedded in. The proposals mention increased funding for local government, but what exactly is that additional funding and where is it coming from?

The proposal to hold back £500 million to fund the business rates safety net in 2016/17 highlighted a difficulty with the self-financing safety net, in that it removes some of the incentive to obtain business rates growth from authorities if they are to lose that for equalisation. There is an argument for taking all the money required for the safety net from a ‘top slicing’. This will be an increasing problem as we move towards 100% retention.

Central government’s intended control of all tariffs and equalisation measures in relation to the local retention of business rates will impact on individual councils in different ways and are beyond the control of the authorities themselves. They are, however, a critical and as yet unknown factor that plays into the authorities’ financial planning processes.

It is of course difficult to discern which authorities have no genuine opportunities for business rates growth and those which still do not understand the importance of using all means possible to increase their income.

The proposals also refer to devolving responsibilities and functions to local government. The uncertainties around both the funding settlement up to 2020 and the mechanics of the fully devolved business rates retention scheme make it something of a shot in the dark to try to identify at this stage what responsibilities and functions could or should be devolved. Local government is pre-occupied at present about how it can fund its current functions.

The IRRV submission put forward several discussion points within the Institute and some being more fully worked points of policy. A few of them are covered here.

Currently, 80% mandatory relief is given where a property is wholly or mainly occupied by a charity for charitable purposes, including charity shops selling mainly donated goods. Where it appears that an empty charity property will be occupied for the purposes of that charity, it is zero rated. This relief has been abused in some cases as a method for commercial occupiers to avoid empty rates. There are also some grey areas where relief has been applied for and in some cases granted in circumstances that were not originally envisaged. Given the localisation of business rates, it would be in line with the localisation agenda to make all charitable relief to be granted at the discretion of the billing authority, whether the property is occupied or empty.

It is reasonable to phase in the increase in rate payment for some ratepayers at a revaluation. However, it is unfair to penalise those who should be benefiting from reductions. Following the introduction of 100% localisation in 2020, it is unlikely that the gainers and losers at a revaluation will be in balance in each local authority area, therefore any relief granted should be able to be claimed by the billing authority, as a top up paid for by a levy on the national multiplier.

In order for business rate retention to work properly, local authorities should have restored to them their link to the appeals process. Billing authorities should once again have the general right to make proposals and to receive copies of all proposals made to amend the list and all decision notices relating to those proposals.

The Central List properties should be within the rate retention scheme and should be part of a local authority’s income. The current arrangements are illogical and result in substantial reductions in income, which in some cases have plunged local authorities into critical financial chaos. It would be a relatively simple task to apportion these values across billing authorities in England.

It’s the turn of the Local Taxation and Revenues Faculty this month, and Moira Hepworth and the Board turn their focus once again to business rates.
“Permission was also granted to challenge the scheme on the grounds that there was discrimination on the basis of disability and/or age, contrary to Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights.”

A strong case for further discretion

Deborah Davies explores a high profile example of the dangers of creating a fair council tax reduction scheme

In November 2015, the High Court dismissed claims that LB Havering’s council tax reduction (CTR) scheme discriminates against the disabled. The claimant, Mr Logan, has many health problems and is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) at the highest rates for care and mobility – it is unlikely that he will ever be able to work.

In 2014/15, Havering had a CTR scheme with maximum support of 100%. Reviewing the scheme for 2015/16, it was decided to reduce maximum support to 85%. Following consultation, a report was provided to the cabinet setting out the case for the proposals and reminding the cabinet members of their public sector equality duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was attached to the report. The cabinet recommended that full council should take the decision to adopt the revised scheme. Full council consists of 54 people, and the report and EIA was not circulated to all individually, although it was available electronically. The council approved the recommendation in January 2015.

Mr Logan received the maximum 85% support and an additional discretionary award, taking relief up to 100%. He was permitted to challenge the decision on two grounds, the principal one being that there had been a failure by the full council to have due regard to the PSED. The argument was based on the failure to provide every member of the council with the report and attached EIA. Permission was also granted to challenge the scheme on the grounds that there was discrimination on the basis of disability and/or age, contrary to Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Mr Justice Blake referred to principles set out by the Court of Appeal in Bracking v Secretary of State for the Work and Pensions (2013), specifically that the duty is on the decision makers personally – it is not a matter of having general regard to equality matters and nor is it a tick-box exercise. The judge found that there was insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that due regard was had to the EIA by those who took the decision. He expected “conscientious consideration of the impact of the proposals on the relevant groups” and it could not be demonstrated that the decision makers had accessed the EIA attached to the officers’ report or had understood the importance of reading it in order to discharge their statutory obligation.

The claimant’s contentions with respect to discrimination on the grounds of age and/or disability were held to fail both under Article 14 ECHR and under the Equality Act. The scheme applied to all people of working age with income below the applicable amount – it was neutral with respect to age or disability. It was not Havering’s scheme that excluded pensioners from the 100% scheme but the primary legislation. The scheme does impact on disabled people, but this is accounted for in disregards to income and the awarding of premiums to calculate the applicable amount. This means that the different situation of the able bodied and the disabled with respect to access to the labour market has been acknowledged in calculating the 85% scheme. Mr Justice Blake went on to say that, where a severely disabled claimant who is unlikely ever to be able to work has basic needs that consume all state benefits and no reasonable way of increasing resources, there is a strong case for the exercise of further discretion to grant 100% CTR. Failure to do so may be challenged as irrational or discriminatory, particularly if expenses relate to disability.

The judge declined Mr Logan’s application for a declaration that Havering’s decision to adopt the scheme was unlawful and a quashing order requiring a fresh decision to be taken – he considered it highly unlikely that even had all members read the EIA they would have made a different decision in relation to their CTR scheme. He did note however that a useful public purpose (to have due regard to the PSED) has been achieved for the future.
Benefits administration over the years

As I start a new job as Local Taxation and Benefits Manager at Wealden District Council, I reflect on benefits administration over the years, having first started as a benefits assessor back in 1983. Some of you may be too young to remember when the former Department of Health and Social Security administered housing costs. "Unified Housing Benefit" was created initially for council tenancy rents in October 1982 and then for private sector rents and rate rebates from April 1983. The reason we were told for the transfer to local authorities (LAs) of housing benefit (HB) was growing rent arrears and that people could not be trusted to look after their own affairs.

Fast forward 30 years plus and the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) seeks to give control of their own financial affairs back to the customer. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) maintained that 7.7m will be on UC by 2017, although at the current rate, with just 197,043 in receipt as at 3rd January 2016 – please see the Department for Work and Pension (DWP)’s own statistics at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/500441/universal-credit-statistics-to-4-feb-2016.pdf – it is evident that it will take many more years! Also very few cases have impacted as yet on HB, with LAs advising that they are getting more work than previously if they provide the Local Support Service for UC. If you also take into account the current consultation on council tax reduction (CTR) schemes, what is the future for LA HB services?

The Pension Service has been very quiet so far about what they are intending to do with housing costs. There are rumours circulating that they are looking for four LA pathfinders from October 2016 to trial housing costs for Pension Credit.

My personal view is that in one way or another (and at least until 2021) we will have to administer HB. It could be longer, as at the current rate it is estimated that UC could be introduced by 2044! Funding cuts to LAs make it hard to invest in resources for benefit services. The infamous TUPE letter to Local Authority Chief Executives in December 2015 suggested an implementation date of three to five years but as UC is a new benefit, staff would not be transferred to the DWP.

Despite the pathfinders, the rumour is that the Pension Service does not want to administer housing costs. Could therefore LAs retain HB for older people by default on a local basis, with financial cuts to grants as we have seen with CTR meaning individual LAs must decide to fund it from other sources or make cuts to the scheme for people of working age? Indeed, a number of authorities previously introducing no cuts until now are introducing them in 2016/17.

CTR is even more fascinating – so far only one LA has moved away from a benefits system on a needs and income basis. As you know, it’s actually a discount rather than a benefit but whilst HB continues in payment, it is far simpler to keep aligned to the HB system, albeit with more and more LAs making more cuts to CTR for people of working age.

So my prediction is in the short term we will have more work rather than less and no one can accurately forecast how long LAs will continue to administer HB. I know that the consultation is still ongoing but my view is that CTR will stay with LAs at least for the time being, as the DWP cannot afford to add to the complex introduction of UC. I hate to think what the effect would be on LA collection rates and arrears if the customer was given money themselves to pay their council tax! I am also of the opinion that older people will continue to get housing costs from LAs, albeit on a local basis.

Finally, I’d like to thank the regular contributors to this column, Phil Adlard and Louise Freeth, for the work they carry out for the Institute’s Benefits Faculty Board, and of course the other members of the Board and our Policy and Research Manager, Moira Hepworth, who continues to do the hard work behind the scenes.

I would also like to take this opportunity to put a plea out to anyone who wants to become a member of the Board to contact either myself or the IRRV at policy@irrv.org.uk giving brief details of your experience and knowledge. We will consider every request from members of the Institute and I promise to personally respond to you and we will be happy to provide additional information or clarification before you commit.

Kevin Stewart FIRRVA MAAT MCMI is Immediate Past President of the IRRV and Chair of its Benefits Faculty Board. You can contact him on kevin.stewart@talktalk.net
Revaluation 2017 in Scotland is well underway, and Joan Hewton describes the process to date and maps out the future plans

The process of revaluation is well underway in Scotland. Rent, cost and property information questionnaires have been issued by all 14 assessors across Scotland since May 2015 with various degrees of success. As every valuation surveyor must agree, good quality valuation is reliant on good quality information being used in both the analysis and valuation process. A less than fulsome return means that the costly process of issuing reminders continues, all affecting the cost to the public purse.

All assessors and their senior staff are members of the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA), a non-statutory body, which has been in existence in one form or another since 1855 and has over 150 years of experience in the field of local property taxation. The main aims of the Association are to encourage amongst its members the exchange of ideas regarding their statutory duties, to promote consistency in the operation of valuation for rating, to act as a consultative and advisory body and to represent the collective interests of its members in carrying out their duties.

The SAA appoint practice note authors who are considered to have specialised knowledge of particular subject categories. Practice note (PN) authors consult with industry, ratepayers and surveyors where possible, with a view to ascertaining any changes in the market that may affect value. The PNs progress through drafting, attaining committee approval as a first stage and final approval by the SAA. An excellent number of draft PNs has already been approved and a final date for approval for the remaining few set for February 2016.

Revaluation timetable
Valuation has commenced with bulk category subjects such as shops, offices and comparative industrials, with the expectation that such subjects will largely have been completed to draft stage by the end of March. It is the intention to progress with the valuation of subjects which can broadly be described as public buildings, e.g. schools, police stations, fire stations, hospitals etc. and miscellaneous subjects, e.g. sports clubs, advertising, leisure, historic buildings, visitor attractions etc., subject to the decapitalisation rate confirmation, which was not available at the time of writing. Approximately 40,000 subjects fall into those classifications and draft valuations are hoped to be finalised by the end of July. Assuming the cost guide is largely finalised and the decapitalisation rate is prescribed by the Scottish Government, it is anticipated to have 75% of all draft valuations complete by end June this year.

To ensure maximum information is submitted prior to finalising analysis and valuation, subjects which are generally let in the open market by reference to turnover or throughput are generally valued during the final few months of the timetable. Such subjects are expected to be valued during the summer of 2016 and amount to approximately 35,000 properties. Again to maximise time for provision of complex cost information, the valuation of subjects by means of the contractors basis are likewise valued over those last few months.

It is important to note that although draft values are generally prepared for the end of September 2016, properties continue to be surveyed/resurveyed and analysed/re-analysed through to March 2017.

Key consultations commenced, awaiting outcome
The Scottish Government has already consulted on the non-domestic rating valuation appeals system and the outcome of that consultation is awaited. Similarly a consultation has also taken place regarding the appropriate decapitalisation rate for the 2017 revaluation, and whether rates should continue to be prescribed and if there should be one or more rate.

The Land Reform Bill is currently before the Scottish Government, with further debate on the part which re-introduces shootings and deer forests to the Valuation Roll. There is some concern amongst land owners and rating practitioners that the legislation may require many low value shootings to be separately entered in the Roll, which may all be subject to relief under the small business bonus scheme.

Expected consultations under consideration
A further consultation on a review of business rates is also expected to be commenced in the very near future. Likewise, a consultation on the need for a transitional relief scheme is expected to be considered.

Changes to expect at this revaluation
As mentioned above, there is a strong probability that shootings and deer forests will require to be valued for the first time in over 20 years. This will require co-operation between the industry and assessors in building knowledge and valuation skills, to ensure such new taxpayers are treated consistently and fairly. The legislative timetable may dictate that such entries may not be concluded by publication date. Assessors have until 31st March 2018 to enter all subjects in the Roll with effect from 1st April 2017.

Another change that has arisen is the tightening of the rules of unit of valuation as a consequence of the clarification given in the Supreme Court case of Woolway (Valuation Officer) v Mazars LLP (2015) UKSC 53. It is expected that this decision may have an effect on a number of properties – the approach to deciding the unit of valuation must be consistently applied by all valuers and in some cases may require a re-survey of lands and heritages, all of which could be time consuming. So many divisions of current entries could cause issues for any transitional relief scheme which may be introduced.

Revaluation outcome
This will probably be the most unpredictable revaluation that I have ever been involved in and I have now worked through eight. Scotland has had an excellent history of maintaining five early revaluations, with this seven year gap being the only blip since the delay of the 1983 revaluation to 1985.

There could be some surprising increases but probably more surprising decreases in rateable value. Early analysis seems to suggest a narrowing of the gap between high and low value areas. One school of thought has suggested that relief under the small bonus scheme has encouraged increased rental levels across small subjects and the state of the economy may have given greater weight to large occupiers renegotiating their rental levels downwards. A more realistic explanation is probably that large occupiers will be professionally advised and as such will have greater negotiating skills largely because such rental income to landlords is far preferred to no rental income, with the added requirement for landlords to pay rates on empty property.

The rental market has certainly changed naturally, but how much has changed as a result of the numerous reliefs and supplements that now exist is not quantifiable.

Joan M Hewton BSc FRICS IRRV is Assessor with Lothian VJB and President of the IRRV’s Scottish Association
Another collection of gems from the valuation industry, courtesy of Geoff Fisher

RATING
Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) consultation on proposals for the local government finance settlement for 2016/17 etc., including future allocation of Revenue Support Grant and the calculation of ‘tariff’ and ‘top up’, plus proposals for phasing out the local government grant and additional responsibilities devolved to local authorities can be viewed at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/494385/Provisional_settlement_consultation_document.pdf The Institute’s response to the consultation paper can be found at http://irrv.net/homenew/page.php?wid=20

Enterprise Bill progress – second reading, House of Commons. The briefing provides an overview and includes Part 6, which would introduce two minor adjustments to business rates legislation. The first seeks to facilitate the sharing of information between the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) and local authorities. The second arises from the government’s review of business rates and would introduce the new appeals system – Check, Challenge, Appeal. Go to http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7485

The Landmark Chambers/RSA Annual Conference and the RSA Members’ Dinner are to be held on 27th April 2016.

VOA before the Parliament’s Treasury Committee – see video link on http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/index/1e0d3275-2c01-405e-be7a-400e72761206

The Rating Diploma Holders are holding in May a series of introduction evenings (London, Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol) for those wishing to know more about the study programme leading to the Diploma. Further details can be obtained from helen.zammit-willson@voa.gsi.gov.uk

STOP PRESS!
ATMs – Interim decision of the Valuation Tribunal for England (March 2016)
This decision determined that in each case, the site of an ATM is a hereditament which is in separate rateable occupation from the host store or premises and dismissed lead appeals for deletions, or mergers with the host store or premises. The hearing concerned appeals by Sainsbury’s, Tesco’s, Cardtronics Europe and the Co-op Group (represented by various QC’s) in respect of various appeals following the VOA’s creation of separate rating assessments in respect of the deletion of an ATM site or a merger with the host store or premises.
In a 34-page decision, VT Vice-President Mr Alf Clark reviewed case law, in particular the Supreme Court decision in Woolway VO v Mazars LLP 2015, as well as the House of Lords decision in Townley Mill v Oldham Assessment Committee, given that it was accepted that the ATM equipment was non-rateable plant and machinery. The decision identifies the ‘hole in the wall’ as a separate hereditament occupied by the ATM operator, albeit by licence or agreement, providing for the operator to install and operate an ATM on the site. The argument that the host stores (Tesco’s, Sainsbury’s, etc) were in paramount control of the site was rejected, quoting the Westminster and John Laing cases and referring to other cases. Some 30,000 properties are said to be affected by this decision.
See: http://www.valuationtribunal.gov.uk/Libraries/Preliminary_Decisions/ATM_Sites_Interim_Decision.sflb.ashx

Billy Joss is the new Chairman of the RICS Rating Diploma Section.
He will be chairing the Annual Rating Diploma Conference on 15th September 2016. With Land and Property Services, Northern Ireland, he has been fully involved in non-domestic rating in various parts of the province, including appeals, the revaluation and training – he gained the special Rating Diploma in 2005. His current role is Senior Valuer in the Commissioner of Valuation’s Appeal Team, responsible for rating appeals of all types of property on both lists, as well as more complex casework at the Lands Tribunal, including the innovative ‘hot bubbling’.

IMPORTANT – ‘Red Book’ exceptions
The RICS has published a clarification on exceptions. All written advice by RICS and IRRV members is subject to the mandatory requirements of PS1&2. Rating valuations by others than a VO or LO do not fall within the statutory capacity exception, but they must comply with PS1&2. Rating valuations by VOs and LOs are within the statutory capacity exception, but they must comply with PS1&2. Rating valuations by SICs and other than a VO or LO do not fall within the statutory capacity exception, but must comply with the RICS/IRRV UK rating consultancy code of practice (third edition). However, IPPs specifying a reduction to £1 are not regarded as a valuation! See http://www.rics.org/uk/knowledge/guides-advice/red-book-scope-and-red-book-exceptions-feb-2016/

IPMS Measurement Code update – now residential
After the controversial introduction (mandatory) of the IPMS Code for offices, RICS has published the draft code on residential for a second consultation. The VOA is sticking with the existing codes for rating and Revaluation 2017 – See VAMP March 2016 Insight.

GENERAL PRACTICE
The annual Compulsory Purchase Association law reform lecture is on Thursday 21st April at Adelaide House, London Bridge, covering Bishopsgate, Ramac and other contentious issues.

Housing Minister Brandon Lewis announced a review of the future of the Homes and Community Agency (HCA), in the context of the ONS decision that the level of HCA control over housing associations classified them as public bodies, resulting in their £Billions of borrowing counting as government debt. The Housing Bill includes reduction of oversight, removal of controls on stock control and on mergers.

Get Geoff Fisher FRICS Dip.Rating IRRV (Hons) REV is a Past President of the IRRV and a Rating Diploma Holder and can be contacted via the Editor. His summaries and any views given are personal and should not be taken as legal opinion.
IRRV Performance Awards 2016

The 2016 Performance Awards Scheme looks to build upon the successful schemes of recent years. There are nine categories; three ‘Team’ and six ‘Excellence’. The on-going changes in the profession are reflected in the choice of categories, whilst the criteria for each category has been updated, to ensure organisations are fully aware of what the Awards Panel is looking for.

Entries are welcomed from organisations in both the public and private sector. All submissions need to be submitted electronically and must not exceed 5,000 words. The closing date for entries is Friday, 10th June 2016; this deadline will not be extended under any circumstances.

**TEAM AWARDS**
- REVENUES
- BENEFITS
- MOST IMPROVED

**EXCELLENCE AWARDS**
- CORPORATE FRAUD
- DEBT MANAGEMENT
- INNOVATION
- PARTNERSHIP WORKING
- SOCIAL INCLUSION
- STAFF DEVELOPMENT

For more information please visit the IRRV Performance Awards scheme 2016 website:
http://irrv.net/homenew/page.php?wid=47

IRRV Annual Conference and Exhibition

18 – 20 October 2016
International Centre, Telford

The 2016 Annual Conference (and Exhibition) will take place in Telford from the 18 October to 20 October. The first day will consist entirely of plenary sessions whilst three separate streams (Local Taxation & Revenues, Benefits and Valuation) will be run on the second day. The final morning will provide delegates with a general update on everything that is happening within the Profession. The Performance Awards Gala Dinner 2016 will take place on the Wednesday evening where the winners will be announced. There will be range of packages to suit individual needs. A limited number of bedrooms will also be held in the local area for delegates attending the conference.

More information, including prices, will be made available on the IRRV website in due course:
www.irrv.net/homenew/item.php?iid=22161&wid=24&did=13

* This discount will only be made available to IRRV Members and Forum, Benefit Advisory or Organisational Members. Delegates must be from the same organisation and bookings must be made at the same time.
Positive response to the 2016/17 FERIS design

The Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) extension provides additional funding for two years to March 2018. FERIS was launched in November 2014 against a backdrop of year on year increases in the estimated losses due to housing benefit (HB) fraud and error (F&E). The latest national statistics on F&E for 2014/15 show estimated losses due to HB F&E reducing from 6% to 5.3%. Some of this is due to methodology changes in the way F&E is calculated – however the main drivers for this reduction are seen as FERIS and Real Time Information (RTI).

We have consulted local authority (LA) representatives through FERIS design workshops, taking on board feedback to improve the scheme design. FERIS rewards LAs for finding more HB reductions. However, LAs who were already performing well, proactively detecting and correcting HB F&E, have found it more difficult to meet the 10% lower threshold where those rewards were initiated. To incentivise better performing LAs to do more, the lower threshold is being reduced and staggered, calculating the actual value of HB reductions each LA finds compared to the expected value of reductions based on their caseload composition. We are therefore using the caseload management information to determine the level of F&E activity during the baseline period and applying lower thresholds accordingly.

Original FERIS thresholds were set at 8% for the first performance period and then 10% for each performance quarter from April 2015. Despite making significant improvements in performance, many LAs are falling short of the 10% baseline. This creates a cliff edge where one LA can improve performance by 9.9% and receive no incentive payment and another with a 10% improvement taking full advantage of the incentive scheme. The new FERIS design adopts fairer starting points, with lower thresholds ranging from 2.5% to 5%, depending on the Caseload Management Information categories. This approach rewards LAs who improve performance with smaller incentive payments and helps to remove the cliff edge between 9.9% and 10%. There is an increase in the amount of incentive payments LAs can qualify for at around 6-8%, which rewards those LAs who make more significant improvements in their performance. Another change from the original scheme is the amount of incentive payments compared to each pound of HB reduction above the threshold. Payments increase the more LAs exceed the threshold. LAs that make more significant improvements will therefore receive more substantial rewards.

Maintenance Funding has been increased by 30% compared to 2015/16. LA feedback shows that Maintenance Funding is critical, strongly influencing FERIS participation and the level of FERIS activity. The FERIS extension provides certainty over funding, which is a key driver for LA engagement, planning and decision-making.

The additional funding will:
• enable LAs to undertake additional activity which will result in more HB reductions
• help maintain F&E as a priority area
• provide additional funding for LAs to undertake optional RTI (or additional F&E activity if they decide not to action optional RTI), and
• allows LAs to partially fund the additional costs of HB debt recovery resulting from FERIS.

The baseline will be adjusted proportionally using the value of HB reductions the LA found in each of the above categories and the caseload changes in that category.

HB statistics indicate that the estimated value of F&E in London, compared to HB spend, is higher than other large cities/regions. Additional funding of £0.75 million is therefore being made available for London LAs to tackle the largest contribution to HB F&E.

The same baseline period is being used in order to maintain consistency. However, the scheme needs to be flexible, to take account of caseload changes resulting from welfare reform and economic factors. As Universal Credit rolls out, HB caseloads are expected to fall. Some LAs will be affected more than others, e.g. digital pilot sites. To allow FERIS to flex with caseload changes, incentive payments at the end of each performance quarter will be calculated using an adjusted baseline. As a result of this feature in the design, LAs will no longer have the right to challenge their baselines on the ground of caseload composition changes.

Adjustments to caseload take account of the value of HB reductions in the LA baseline across four categories:
• working age standard cases
• working age passported cases
• pension age standard cases
• pension age passported cases.

The baseline will be adjusted proportionally using the value of HB reductions the LA found in each of the above categories and the caseload changes in that category. Baselines will be adjusted up and down, depending on caseload composition changes – however, LAs can expect to see a reduction in baseline.

It is our intention to issue optional RTI referrals from May 2016. Many LAs have undertaken reviews/intervention activity of their working age caseload in addition to RTI bulk data matching. Optional RTI referrals do not attract ‘New Burden’ payments or incur subsidy penalties but they will help LAs meet their FERIS thresholds, providing a more effective and efficient means of identifying changes.

The 2017/18 FERIS design has yet to be fully decided. We’ll be reviewing and refining the scheme during 2016/17 to take account of LA feedback and the impact of welfare reforms. LAs will be advised of the 2017/18 scheme details in 2017.

LAs have responded positively to the 2016/17 FERIS design, with over 330 applications being submitted in advance of the 29 February deadline, despite the short timescale for submission of applications this year.
The good news keeps on coming!

The effectiveness of compliance following the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act is good news all round, says James Mckillop

Browsing the internet these days and trying to find some sensationalist news about the present Taking Control of Goods (TCOG) Regulations is, I find, becoming harder to do (I was going to say ‘new’ regulations, but as at this April, would you believe that the regulations are in their third year). This of course is a very good thing for all those organisations involved in the enforcement world. The TCOG Regulations that were laid before Parliament in 2013 and the subsequent regulations in 2014 effectively brought an end to undesirable customs, heralding a new era of working hours. This is important in order to enable us to increase our chances of making contact with those individuals not available during the day.

Regulation 6(1) of the TCOG Regulations 2013 states that a notice of enforcement must be given to the customer not less than seven clear days before the Enforcement Agent (EA) takes control of the customer’s goods. The regulations say that Sundays, bank holidays, Good Friday or Christmas Day do not count in calculating this period, and when factoring in the relevant time period for service by post, seven clear days effectively translates to around 13 days, as the minimum period in which an actual visit can (if needed) take place after the issue of the notice of enforcement by post.

At Rossendale, we understand the importance of trying to engage with the customer as early as possible after our clients have referred cases to us, and of equal importance is the need to keep enforcement fees that the customer can incur to a minimum. As a reminder here, the statutory cost of a notice of enforcement is £75, with an actual visit incurring a further £235.

“If a telephone number is confirmed, we will make at least three calls at different times of the day, on different days, with calls also being made outside of working hours. This is important in order to enable us to increase our chances of making contact with those individuals not available during the day.”

We provide clients with an integrated, bespoke strategy tailored to a number of debt types, including council tax, non-domestic rates and road traffic cases, involving up to a four stage recovery process. For council tax, this involves a 30-day compliance stage strategy where within eight hours of receiving case instructions, we carry out data cleansing, residency checking and telephone/mobile appending before posting the Notice of Enforcement no later than the next working day (or sending electronically where our ‘fast track’ service is preferred). At the same time, cases are placed in our ‘power dialler’ for predictive, power, voice broadcasting, preview and text to speech contact modes. If a telephone number is confirmed, we will make at least three calls at different times of the day, on different days, with calls also being made outside of working hours. This is important in order to enable us to increase our chances of making contact with those individuals not available during the day.

We have also recently expanded our contact centre initiatives for Sunday working, which has further increased our contact success rate. Up to three further letters are sent at weekly intervals, blended with our outbound telephony and SMS calling campaigns, delivered by our customer contact centre. Our focus is of course first and foremost on the immediate full payment of the debt. Where this is not possible, our fully trained customer contact centre staff (IRRV accredited training in PhoneCoach, Effective Payment Negotiation Skills, Vulnerability and Safeguarding) engage with the customer, looking to set up a realistic, sustainable payment arrangement which is secured by their work or other income details. We realise the importance of treating all our customers fairly and the need to be aware of and assist those individuals we make contact with who may, due to their personal circumstances, be identified as vulnerable. We must not underestimate the importance of this, not just from a legal perspective, but from a humane one too. Again, we rely on our skilled customer contact centre staff (who promote effective contact methods endorsed by the Money Advice Trust and Royal College of Psychiatrists) to fully evaluate each situation on its merits – allowing us, where necessary, to signpost customers deemed to be considered vulnerable and enter into a suitable, ethical recovery solution that assists in resolving, rather than inflaming, the situation.
Indeed, a thorough approach to activities at the compliance stages allows us to continuously monitor and assess the most optimum contact and collection strategy, for example where a customer is deemed to be vulnerable, a council tax reduction scheme debt is identified at the compliance stage and there is clearly a low propensity to pay, with little or no likelihood of being able to TCOG at the enforcement visit stage. We can focus on specific contact centre initiatives, looking at sensible, appropriate payment arrangements and money advice, including through independent advice sectors such as AdviceUK, Citizens Advice Bureau and StepChange Debt Charity. This does not necessarily mean that a particular case still won’t escalate to enforcement stage if needed, but it certainly allows us to make a full evaluation of the situation before proceeding further down the recovery route.

Since April 2014, we have issued close on 500,000 notice of enforcement ‘compliance’ letters on behalf of our council tax clients across England and Wales. The significance of our (up to) four letter compliance strategy is telling, with 26% of those who we successfully make contact with prior to enforcement visit stage engaging with us at the statutory notice of enforcement (compliance) first letter. 19% engagement is achieved at the reminder stage, 10% at final notice and a further 5% at notice of visit stage. We also collect 40% of compliance stage collections following a defaulted arrangement letter stage, issued before allocation for a visit. These high success rates obtained during compliance, which do not therefore attract an enforcement fee, are achieved by continual investment in this area of the recovery process. It is a testament to our contact centre team that we have an 84% payment arrangement retention rate, demonstrating the value of our ‘Treating Customers Fairly’ procedure. Our EAs can then be freed up to deal with those cases that actually require a visit, allowing us to best utilise our field resources, working more intelligently and efficiently. It is also worth mentioning here that another benefit of a more progressive compliance strategy is identifying a higher proportion of ‘gone away’ accounts at this stage, that might otherwise have been referred to an EA for a visit. Being more proactive earlier on in the recovery process allows us to more quickly deploy our data intelligence and analytics division, with rigorous tracing and investigation, and where tracing is successful, apply our propensity to pay modelling techniques to determine the most appropriate recovery route.

And the good news keeps on coming! In addition to our Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement (TCE) Act collection initiatives, our parent company Marston Holdings has enabled us to provide creditors with debt recovery services for customers who have moved outside England or Wales, with the acquisition of Scott & Co and AA Hutton for enforcement services in Scotland, as well as Moreton Smith Receivables Ltd., who are our international debt collection and legal recovery specialists. These acquisitions will allow us to provide a truly integrated service to our existing, as well as new, clients for the cost effective recovery of all debt types from individuals and businesses located outside England and Wales.

If you would like to discuss any of our debt recovery solutions in more detail, please contact Dave Chapman, Managing Director of Rossendale, on 01706 833 023.

“\textit{It is also worth mentioning here that another benefit of a more progressive compliance strategy is identifying a higher proportion of ‘gone away’ accounts at this stage, that might otherwise have been referred to an EA for a visit.}”

James Mckillop IRRV (Hons) is Business Audit Development Manager with Rossendale
Supported Exempt and Specified Accommodation – The Challenges Explored

19 April: London

This meeting aims to examine the current and future challenges within this highly complex area for those working within the Benefits field. Topics to be explored will include the implications of scheme types, issues with identification both of the schemes themselves and the landlords as well as potential restrictions. The meeting will also explore the implications for housing providers and the changes benefit practitioners may be faced with as a result of recent Government announcements. The meeting will be hosted Jim McCafferty, IRRV President; Moira Griffiths, Family Mosaic’s Group Care and Support Director; Louise Freeth, IRRV Council member and a representative from the National Housing Federation.

(Note: As numbers at any one meeting are limited to 20, early booking is recommended)

http://www.irrv.net/homenew/item.php?iid=25709&wid=24&did=12

Fees

IRRV Member . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . £155 plus VAT
BAS/Forum/Organisational Member . . . . . . . . . . . . . £185 plus VAT
Non Member . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . £215 plus VAT

IRRV Training Days

Early booking advised!

Special Offer: Members can book 3 places for the price of 2*

- Introduction to Business Rates – Janet Alexander IRRV (Hons)
  26 April, London

- Introduction to Council Tax – Janet Alexander IRRV (Hons)
  9 June, London

- Business Rates Master Class – Janet Alexander IRRV (Hons)
  5 & 6 May, London

- Council Tax Master Class – Janet Alexander IRRV (Hons)
  23 & 24 June, London

- PhoneCoach In House Training – Allan Traynor FCCA IRRV (Hons)

For more information (including fees) please visit the IRRV website

www.irrv.net/homenew/item.php?iid=25676&wid=24&did=15

* This special offer will only apply to the introduction and masterclass training days and is available to IRRV Members and Forum, Benefit Advisory or Organisational Members. Delegates must be from the same organisation and bookings must be made at the same time.

Fees:

**Introduction**

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**Master Class**

£250 plus VAT
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This February, I spoke at the IRRV’s excellent Welfare Reform and Benefits seminar in London, at which Chief Executive David Magor’s spirited and entertaining contribution was compared by Institute President Jim McCafferty to the marathon performances of veteran comedian, Ken Dodd! As ever, Mr Magor delivered serious messages with humour and style.

This resonated with me. As a youth, I attended the Holt High School in Liverpool (now Childwall Comprehensive) — a state grammar school that liked to consider itself a more august institution than perhaps it was. One suspects it was somewhat to the Headmaster’s chagrin that by far our most celebrated Old Boy was the aforementioned Mr Dodd.

Nor was this my only connection. Ken Dodd came from a family of coal merchants and his brother indeed sold said merchandise to my late Auntie Kitty. Mention of this much-loved and formidable relative — who lived into her nineties and was famously intolerant of any errors or glitches concerning her benefits — brings me back to the point. My session was titled, ‘Is the role of the third sector in Universal Credit certain?’

I began by putting my cards on the table as regards Universal Credit (UC). Is it a good idea or not? To my mind, UC had some good points or not? To my mind, UC had some good points — but also some clear defects. I emailed some contacts in LA benefits services and welfare rights services and asked them.

The general picture seems to be:
• not much is happening yet, because of reduced hours or closure of existing services in both direct LA provision and voluntary sector funding — as well as the shrinkage of legal aid.
• To get an impression of how universal support is working out, I emailed some contacts in LA benefits services and welfare rights services and asked them.

The comments made by my correspondents included:

“The local agreement involves our into work/ jobs support service and our service for young vulnerable adults; and another team that works primarily with benefit cap families... Fairly small scale and there has to be lots of recording of support given etc. in order to get a relatively small amount of money. [There is a view that it’s] not worth the extra work involved in claiming it.” (London borough)

“We are a mid-phase LA (UC for singles since November 2015). We have little experience yet. In fact the main issues seem to have been UC claimants moving into our area and getting into mix-ups involving loss of housing costs etc.” (LA in the south west)

“Roll-out so far has been slow [but] when digital is rolled out this will be a very different story, as it will be all new claims and changes and not just singles on JSA – this is when we will get significant problems and the very much increased need for support.” (LA in the north east).

I reported last issue on research by 16 Citizens’ Advice Bureaux, describing how 355 of their clients had fared under UC. By definition, these were cases where problems had arisen and were more complex than the initial non-householder roll-out.

Housing costs were a leading problem, arrears accumulating as delays (both built-in and unintended) disrupted household finances. The erroneous assumption that most low-paid workers are paid monthly was a major factor. This picture was confirmed by other research published by the National Federation of ALMOs and the Association of Retained Council Housing.

Advice networks
So what is the role of the third sector as regards providing advice and advocacy around UC? Firstly, the term ‘third sector’ doesn’t quite fit the issues. Voluntary sector and local authority (LA) advice services are often part of a local network, some LAs carefully planning the balance between direct provision and voluntary sector funding. And we also need to factor in the advice role of social housing providers.

Advice networks

Locally, there are countervailing elements. A modest amount of ‘universal support’, financed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), collides with the effects of reduced hours or closure of existing services as a result of funding cuts — in both direct LA provision and voluntary sector funding — as well as the shrinkage of legal aid.

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The text of the new EU General Data Protection Regulation has now been finalised. When it comes into force it will replace all data protection legislation in EU member states (including the UK’s Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA)) without the need for further national legislation. The Regulation will apply to any entity offering goods or services (regardless of payment being taken) and any entity monitoring the behaviours of citizens residing within the EU. Companies are now directly responsible for DP compliance wherever they are based (and not just their EU-based offices) as long as they are processing EU citizens’ personal data.

“**If they rely on the consent of the Data Subject, they must be able to demonstrate that it was freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous for each purpose for which the data is being processed.**”

**Principles**
The Data Protection Principles, as set out in the DPA, remain, but they have been condensed into six as opposed to eight principles. Article 5 of the Regulation states that personal data must be:

1. Processed fairly, lawfully and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject.
2. Collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed for other purposes incompatible with those purposes.
3. Adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.
4. Accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date.
5. Kept in a form that permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed.
6. Processed in a way that ensures appropriate security of the personal data including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage, using appropriate technical or organisational measures.

**Consent**
Like the DPA, the Regulation will require Data Controllers to have a legitimate reason for processing personal data. If they rely on the consent of the Data Subject, they must be able to demonstrate that it was freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous for each purpose for which the data is being processed. Consent can be given by a written, including electronic, or oral statement. This could include the Data Subject ticking a box when visiting a website, choosing technical settings for social network accounts or by any other statement or conduct which clearly indicates his/her acceptance of the proposed processing of personal data. Silence, pre-ticked boxes or inactivity will no longer constitute consent.

**Children**
The preamble to the Regulation states: “Children deserve specific protection of their personal data, as they may be less aware of risks, consequences, safeguards and their rights in relation to the processing of personal data. This concerns especially the use of personal data of children for the purposes of marketing or creating personality or user profiles and the collection of child data when using services offered directly to a child.” Article 8 requires that where the personal data of a child under 16 is being processed to provide ‘information society services’ (e.g. online businesses, social networking sites etc.) consent must be obtained from the holder of parental responsibility for the child. Member states are allowed though to lower this threshold where appropriate but not below the age of 13.

**Data Subjects’ rights**
The list of rights that a Data Subject can exercise has been widened by Section 2 of the Regulation. The subject access right, rectification and being able to object to direct marketing remain. The right to have personal data processed for restricted purposes and the right to transfer data/have it transferred to another Data Controller (data portability) are new rights. In addition, Article 17 introduces a ‘Right To Be Forgotten’, which means that Data Subjects will be able to request that their personal data is erased by the Data Controller and no longer processed. This will be where the data is no longer necessary in relation to the purposes for which it is processed, where Data Subjects have withdrawn their consent, where they object to the processing of their data or where the processing does not comply with the Regulation. However, the further retention of such data will be lawful in some cases, e.g. amongst others, where it is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation or for reasons of public interest in the area of public health or for the exercise or defence of legal claims.

To strengthen the ‘Right To Be Forgotten’ in the online environment, the Regulation requires that a Data Controller who has made the personal data public should inform other Data Controllers which are processing the data to erase any links to, or copies or replications of that data.

**Data protection by design**
Data Controllers will be expected to include
Data protection controls at the design stage of new projects involving the processing of personal data. Where they wish to process personal data that poses potentially high risks they will have to, prior to the processing, carry out a Data Protection Impact Assessment. Supervisory authorities (the member state’s DP regulators, e.g. the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) in the UK) will be able to produce lists as to what sort of processing would warrant such an assessment.

**Notification**

The current system of notification under the DPA will be replaced by a requirement for Data Controllers to keep an internal record in relation to all personal data they process (Article 28). The record must include, amongst other things, details of the purpose of processing of personal data, recipients, transfers to third countries, time limits for erasure as well as a general description of the technical and organisational measures in place protecting the data.

**Security breaches**

Under the DPA, even in the case of the most serious data breaches, there is no requirement to inform the ICO. Article 31 of the Regulation requires that, as soon as the Data Controller becomes aware that a personal data breach has occurred, it should without undue delay and, where feasible, not later than 72 hours after having become aware of it, notify the personal data breach to the ICO, unless the controller is able to demonstrate that the breach is unlikely to result in a risk for the rights and freedoms of individuals. Where this cannot be achieved within 72 hours, an explanation of the reasons for the delay should accompany the notification to the ICO and information may be provided in phases without undue further delay.

Furthermore, Data Subjects should be notified without undue delay if the personal data breach is likely to result in a high risk to their rights and freedoms, in order to allow them to take the necessary precautions. This notification should describe the nature of the personal data breach, as well as recommendations for the individual concerned to mitigate potential adverse effects. This should be done as soon as reasonably feasible, and in close cooperation with the ICO and respecting guidance provided by it or other relevant authorities (e.g. law enforcement authorities).

**Fines**

Currently the ICO can issue a Monetary Penalty Notice of up to £500,000 for serious breaches of the DPA. The Regulation introduces much higher fines.

For some breaches of the Regulation (e.g. failing to comply with Data Subjects’ rights or the conditions for processing), Data Controllers can receive a fine of up to 4% of global annual turnover for the preceding year (for undertakings) or 20 million Euros. For other breaches (e.g. failing to keep records or complying with security obligations) the fine can be up to ten million Euros or 2% of global annual turnover (for undertakings).

**Data Protection Officer**

Section 4 of the Regulation introduces a statutory role of Data Protection Officer (DPO). Most organisations handling personal data, both Data Controllers and Data Processors, will require a DPO who will have a key role in ensuring compliance with the Regulation. A group of undertakings may appoint a single DPO provided that he/she is easily accessible. Public bodies may also have a single DPO for several such authorities or bodies, taking account of their organisational structure and size.

The DPO, who can be a staff member or contractor, shall be designated on the basis of professional qualities and, in particular, expert knowledge of data protection law and practices and the ability to fulfill the tasks referred to in Article 37. These are:

- to inform and advise the controller or the processor and the employees who are processing personal data of their obligations pursuant to this Regulation
- to monitor compliance with this Regulation, including the assignment of responsibilities, awareness-raising and training of staff involved in the processing operations, and the related audits
- to provide advice where requested as regards the data protection impact assessment and monitor its performance pursuant to Article 33
- to cooperate with the supervisory authority (the ICO)
- to act as the contact point for the supervisory authority on issues related to the processing of personal data.

The Regulation is accompanied by a Directive, which contains new rules for data protection when applied to crime and justice, but which can be implemented by each Member State through its own laws with greater flexibility.

The European Parliament and Council will formally adopt the final text of the Regulation at the beginning of 2016. It will come into force two years thereafter. There is a lot to learn and do in the next two years. All data protection practitioners and lawyers need to read the Regulation and consider its impact on their organisation and clients. Training and awareness at all levels needs to start now.

Ibrahim Hasan is a solicitor and director of Act Now Training (www.actnow.org.uk) who run workshops on the new Regulation throughout the UK.
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IRRV Pre-Examination Course
9 – 13 May 2016, Ramada Hotel, Telford (Ironbridge)

Monday 9 May
Level 3 Certificate: .. Introduction to Valuation for Rating
Diploma: ................. Revenues Administration & Public Sector Finance
Diploma: ................. Welfare Benefits Administration & Public Sector Finance

Tuesday 10 May
Level 3 Certificate: .. Introduction to Non-Domestic Rate Law
Diploma: .......... Introduction to Welfare Benefits
Diploma: .............. Non-Domestic Rate Law & Practice
Diploma: ............... Welfare Benefits Law & Practice

Wednesday 11 May
Level 3 Certificate: .... Business Rate Administration
Level 3 Certificate: .. Revenues and Local Taxation Administration
Level 3 Certificate: .... Valuation Tribunal Administration & Administrative Justice

Level Certificate: .. Welfare Benefits Administration
Diploma: .................. Management (includes Management Case Studies)

Thursday 12 May
Level 3 Certificate: .. Introduction to Council Tax Law
Diploma: .................. Council Tax Law & Practice
Diploma: .................. Valuation for Rating

Friday 13 May
Diploma: ................. Law of Property

Subject fees (excl. VAT):
1 subject: ............... £210
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“They have a data warehouse which automatically extracts data from the service’s operational systems and transforms it into performance indicators on dashboards customised for each work stream, team and employee.”

What does it take to be an innovator in local government?

When we talk about innovators, a quick look on wiki references a person or organisation willing to introduce something better than has gone before. Although a fitting definition, it isn’t quite as easy to deliver as it sounds.

What does it take? Guts, gumption and an open and enquiring mind. There has to be an acceptance in an authority first of all that a process, service or action can be delivered better and, most importantly in these economically challenging times, more efficiently and cost effectively.

Making the case for change
The first step towards becoming an innovator is the ability to challenge the status quo with confidence. Just because something has always been done in a certain way doesn’t mean it is the right or best way. The people we typically work with in councils want to know everything there is to know about the data they hold. They want to be able to drill down into the detail to identify what their debt position is, which is their most important and achievable goals and how can you measure success once change has been implemented?

If you don’t measure it, how do you know you need to change it
If you aren’t already measuring the area you wish to change for the better, then how do you know it needs change, how can you set realistic and achievable goals and how can you measure success once change has been implemented?

Pioneers of change
Take Dumfries and Galloway Council for instance, one of our very first customers – they opted to undertake a whole business process re-engineering exercise. This included introducing a range of new technologies, including workflow systems and ‘OLAP’ reporting technology, so that they could provide a step change in performance. An award winning authority, they continue to work with us today, using business modelling techniques to track anticipated performance improvements throughout a project. They can proactively drill down into specific teams and individuals to measure and evaluate their productivity by tracking and measuring each activity a person undertakes and their time to complete it. They have a data warehouse which automatically extracts data from the service’s operational systems and transforms it into performance indicators on dashboards customised for each work stream, team and employee.

Paula Doherty, Principal Benefit Officer at Dumfries and Galloway Council comments, “using Destin performance monitoring allows staff to spend more time managing performance and driving improvements as the monitoring is all done for them.”

Change isn’t all about the big projects
It’s not all about the big projects though – sometimes it can be as simple as evaluating the performance of two teams to identify why one is outperforming the other and it’s not always related to the obvious. Do they have an easier caseload? Is it down to the personnel in the team? Yes, the data can provide the initial evidence that one team is indeed better, but it can still require the skill of the manager to drill down into the detail to try and identify why – and this requires tenacity, intelligence and curiosity in equal measure.

Why projects fail
One of the biggest reasons we see projects fail to get off the ground time and again is because councils have no valid way of evaluating to what extent the project will work and what benefit it will bring without the project actually being implemented. It is in these instances that innovation can require a leap of faith or taking a calculated risk but if you are clear from the outset on how you will evaluate and prioritise things, you can ultimately work out how successful the project will be in the end.

Data helps make a case for change
The key element to any successful project is ensuring its objectives are bound in reality, and you can do this by looking at your existing data in relation to a project to quantify the problem you currently face and use this as the basis to identify to what extent the proposed ‘fix’ will work.

In this instance, an analytical mind is helpful, capable of a bit of data crunching and analysis to help validate claims of what a new approach or solution can provide. Specialist third parties should be able to assist with this, particularly with other reference sites or case histories.

Decision by committee
Good communication and influencing skills are also important, because there is rarely any one person who makes a decision to proceed within an authority. To push through change and get sign-off on new projects, you will most likely be lobbying different departments, including finance and procurement, to get budget for and fund the project, as well as IT, who may need to support new technologies and help install or implement them.

Get staff buy-in
If you are investing in new technology or processes your staff will be expected to adopt, it can make all the difference getting their buy-in early on, by ensuring that they feel involved in the process from the start. By clearly explaining why you feel change is necessary and taking their views into account, you are more likely to have people embrace the change.

Just to recap, it takes a lot to push through change in any organisation. As an innovator you typically will demonstrate confidence, curiosity, and an unwillingness to accept things as they are. Analysis and evaluation of where you are versus where you need to be is also a must – and you then need solid people skills to see it through.

Tracy McAvoys is Marketing Director with Destin Solutions. You can contact her on info@destin.co.uk or call 01772 842092

Back office processing
Seeing is not always believing

In my last contribution (January/February Insight), I was writing about the impact on council tax services of the subtle use of behaviour change or ‘nudge’ techniques in driving up direct debit rates and reducing phone calls.

This article is going to widen the thinking behind behaviour change and demonstrate that these techniques can be used over a range of services to great effect. I will also talk about the latest innovation we are working on called ‘eye tracking’, which adds a totally different dimension to user testing.

Take the humble post-it note, usually seen plastered on people’s office walls when they are leading on some type of ‘business process improvement’ project. We came across a research paper about an innovative behaviour change project in the USA, where a university was experiencing low response rates from their students to their annual ‘student satisfaction survey forms’. To solve this problem, they simply stuck a post-it note on the front of their survey forms, just requesting that the form was completed. We were surprised by the findings that, just by putting a post-it note on the form asking people to complete it, the result was a much higher response rate. This started us thinking of where we could use this within our shared service.

The area we decided to focus on was corporate income. Traditionally, we had a low response rate when sending out reminder letters to people owing the council money asking them to contact us and pay. For a set period we randomly divided the reminder letters into two groups – one group had the ‘normal’ letter (control group) and the second group had a yellow post-it attached with the words ‘You need to respond to this today’ printed in a style to mimic human handwriting.

When we looked at the resulting levels of customer contact, we were really pleased to see that, whilst the ‘control group’ (no post-it note) level of response was around 15%, those letters with the post-it note resulted in a response rate of 30%. A big improvement made for the minimal cost of some pre-printed post-it notes. Colleagues in some other Kent councils have also tried this in their council area with almost identical results, so it appears that this intervention is successful in different geographical areas. Since then we have rolled them out to a number of areas where we want the customer to contact us quickly.

We have also used the power of ‘default’ (see my last article) to sign thousands more people up to council tax paperless billing, by using their email address they supplied for garden waste collection renewal to set them out for paperless council tax e-billing. Naturally, customers were given the opportunity to ‘opt out’ of this if they didn’t agree with their email address being used in this way but the vast majority were happy for us to do this.

Since we have made a large number of interventions using behaviour change techniques to find the ideal content of letters, we found ourselves wondering if the layout of the letters was of a high standard. This led to another exciting development in East Kent, where we are using the ‘eye tracking’ glasses which we have hired from a specialist company, to judge whether customers are absorbing the information we have included in some of the letters we send and online content on the websites. These glasses contain tiny cameras in the frames which are aimed back into the eye, and they track every single tiny movement the pupil makes and then ‘maps’ it to the documents/online content we give them to read.

A heat map identifies what the eye really sees

Andrew Stevens is Assistant Director (Customer Delivery) with EK Services. You can contact him on Andrew.stevens@ekservices.org
Making reporting easy

The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) is working with billing authorities (BAs) to design, develop and roll out a digital system for BAs in England and Wales to submit their council tax and non-domestic rating reports.

The VOA is changing the way it works to become more efficient and improve our services to our customers and partners. We want to be more digital, both in terms of how we work and how we interact with others.

One example of this is the way we will ask BAs to submit their reports. As you may already know, BAs have a responsibility to inform the VOA of anything which might result in a change to council tax or non-domestic rating lists. We call these ‘notifications reports’, and in 2014/15 we received nearly 500,000 of them from BAs across England and Wales.

We already have an online facility for BAs to submit reports, known to most as ‘e-BARs’ (Electronic Billing Authority Reports). Yet, nearly ten years after its introduction, most BAs still send their reports either by email or as paper versions in the post.

We wanted to understand why more BAs don’t use the e-BARs system, so we talked to BAs, their software providers and their commercial partners to find out. We learned that BAs often experience problems with e-BARs and that the system can be difficult to use, so we have designed a new way of submitting reports based on BAs’ needs.

The new system addresses the problems BAs have told us about, it’s easy to use, it’s stable and it’s compatible with BAs’ software – we have worked with BAs as we designed, built and tested the service to make sure of this.

The BAs who have tested the new system told us it has significantly reduced time spent on submitting reports each week.

The new service saves time by taking raw data extracted from BAs’ systems and translating it into a language our systems can understand, without the need for BAs’ manipulation or editing. In just a few clicks, BAs simply upload a file exported directly from their software into our system.

Because the new service interprets and validates the information contained in the BAs’ files, BAs are far less likely to encounter errors. When an error occurs, the service locates and describes it, eliminating the need for the BA to check through all the reports, allowing them to quickly resolve it. If the service identifies an error in a report, no other reports being uploaded are affected, reducing delays.

In addition to using the new service to submit reports, BAs will also be able to view and download a permanent record of their submissions, reducing the likelihood of duplicate or missed reports and providing an audit trail.

Here’s what some of the BAs who have tested the new service have told us:

"We have been involved in the testing of the new report submission service and have recently viewed the new prototype we are very impressed. The efficiency and savings that will result compared with the (current) e-BAR system are apparent and we await eagerly its introduction."

Karen Bennett, Revenue Team Leader, Cornwall Council

"We were impressed by the easy-to-follow screens and the simplicity of the whole process. No time wasted recording on spreadsheets, just run and save one report on the operating system and upload."

Geoff Twidale, Operations Manager, North and North East Lincolnshire Council Shared Service

"The proposed new system of transmitting our BA Reports to (the VOA) seemed straightforward and easy to use."

Kelvin Jeffreys, Corporate Revenues Manager, City of Cardiff Council

"The fact that the weekly upload to your web page doesn’t fail if there is the odd error is a definite plus."

Sarah Sutherland, Team Leader – Systems, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

"In the world of joined-up seamless working and digitalisation, (the new system) is a must for billing authorities looking for LEAN processes!"

Ian Sims, Local Taxation Manager, Huntingdonshire District Council

We expect to starting rolling out the new service to BAs in April 2016, and we would like all BAs to be using it to submit their reports by the end of the year.

We will be talking to BAs in more detail about the new service before we roll it out. If you have any questions about the new service, or would like further information, please contact me at chris.brain@digital.voa.gov.uk.

Chris Brain of the Valuation Office Agency introduces a new digital reporting service for billing authorities to save you time and money.
Training comes at a cost but is also an investment. The right training gives enforcement agents the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their duties lawfully and ethically, boosting confidence and improving professionalism.

**Excel Civil Enforcement**’s training wing provides a range of courses and workshops for enforcement agents and back office support staff from taking control of goods, through vulnerability and mental health awareness to manual handling and conflict management. Training is delivered by David Grimes, BA (Hons), a qualified teacher and City & Guilds Instructor as well as an experienced enforcement agent. Excel has already assisted many local authority in-house enforcement agents and back office revenue support staff to achieve essential qualifications and relevant CPD credits.

**Level 2 qualification in Taking Control of Goods**

Excel operates an approved examination centre for the Level 2 Award in **taking control of goods**. The award sits on Ofqual’s **Regulated Qualification Framework** and is approved by **Skills for Justice**.

Time is running out for many enforcement agents who are currently unqualified. Because transitional regulations permitted enforcement agents to replace their existing certificate under the 1998 rules where their certificate expired on or before 6th August 2014, there are still many enforcement agents who can legally take control of goods until 5th August 2016 without yet having achieved the new qualification. By 6th August 2016 every enforcement agent actively involved in taking control of goods (unless exempt) must have the new qualification.

**Vulnerability and mental health awareness**

Excel delivers **workshops** and **training courses** on this subject to businesses and local authorities for both front line and back office staff.

Of key importance for enforcement agents is the need to be aware of vulnerability and mental health conditions when enforcing writs and warrants. They must be appropriately trained and have systems in place to be able to respond appropriately. People suffering from mental ill-health may not open or respond to letters so the first person to realise that there may be vulnerability will be the enforcement agent; hence the need for **specialised training**.

There is strong social stigma attached to mental ill-health and sufferers can experience **discrimination** in all aspects of their lives. They struggle with the resulting symptoms and disabilities and are challenged by the **stereotypes and prejudice** that result from misconceptions about mental ill-health; consequently, they are deprived of the opportunities that define a quality of life. Misconceptions, stigma and discrimination trap sufferers in a cycle of **illness** and **debt**.

There are many factors that may make a debtor vulnerable and may impact in different ways on their capacity to protect or represent their interests. These include suffering from a **cognitive impairment**, having a **learning disability**, **literacy or numeracy difficulties**, having a **speech impairment**, or **not speaking English** as a first language.

Older debtors can be vulnerable not because of their age but due to a range of linked factors. They are more likely to be **disabled** and less likely to have **access to the internet**. Behaviourally, older people often display more **loss aversion** than other vulnerable groups and are less likely to seek help when things go wrong. This can impact on the health of frail, elderly debtors particularly if they self-ration or **under-heat** their homes. They can also experience a spiral of problems due to their reluctance to **seek help** when things start to go wrong.

Vulnerability and mental health awareness training is essential for today’s enforcement agents and their support teams.

For more information please contact David Grimes on 0845 370 7775 or training@excel-enforcement.co.uk
“Although this may be treating the symptom and not the cause, it should be noted that removing the need for the claimant to chase up progress would always be the best course of action.”

Is central government playing catch-up with local authorities?

A few technology issues have caught my interest lately and sadly I have started to wonder if central government is playing catch-up with local authorities as to how it uses technology to communicate with its citizens. Gov.uk Notify is a new service being launched by the government and at the time of writing was expected to start in February 2016.

The aim is to reduce the millions of calls the government receives every year from people anxious to find out where 'their thing' is. Citizens have to spend time on hold and running call centres costs the government a lot of money. It is believed that Gov.uk Notify is going to make it easy to keep people informed, by allowing service teams across government to send text messages, emails or letters to their users, before they get anxious enough to call.

Whilst I'm sure this is not new to local authorities who already use SMS and emails to update people, it appears to be new to central government.

Interestingly, the 'Notify' service still includes letters being sent out. It appears that some people still want, or need, 'something in writing' and that government services still have some legislative requirements to notify people by post. So apparently that's why letters are still included.

However, I do wonder why SMS is still included, as there is often a cost to this of pence per message, which emails don't attract. Obviously there are some people with old (non-smart) phones, but with digital by default being the government’s objective, then maybe SMS should be removed at the earliest opportunity.

Initially, the first people to receive notifications through the platform will be those applying for a lasting power of attorney or getting an MOT. There are a few more services planned and finally, in the summer, it is planned to open it up to all of government. In a previous blog on status tracking, the gov.uk team identified that the following services could benefit from using notifications:

- MOT reminders emailed to all vehicle owners
- Jobseekers Allowance complaints acknowledged immediately via text message
- student finance documentary evidence receipts acknowledged by email or text
- Lasting Power of Attorney updates automatically dispatched by post
- Universal Credit (UC) (Digital) updates texted to claimants
- voter registration application receipts sent to people via text message
- medical assessment updates emailed to drivers
- Land Registry updates via email and text message for property conveyancers.

It is interesting that UC is included in possible applications, I would have thought that it would have been top of the list.

There are other applications that could benefit. For example, for one I would like to receive an email or SMS to remind me when my car tax is due, rather than have a reminder posted to me.

The clever thing would be to automate the sending of notifications, and in an ideal world, notifications would be fully automated, triggered when something is received and scanned in the post room, or when a caseworker approves something and clicks 'save'. This would be exceedingly useful for a UC claim, so claimants could be kept informed of how their claim is progressing, so reducing the need for avoidable contact when claimants call to chase how things are progressing. Although this may be treating the symptom and not the cause, it should be noted that removing the need for the claimant to chase up progress would always be the best course of action.

I will watch Gov.uk Notify with interest, as it moves into its live beta phase, and if possible report on progress.

Gov.uk – Notify and the Universal Credit landlord portal are the province of Simon Bailey this month

The other area of ground breaking technology news is the recommendation by the Work and Pensions Committee that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) trial a landlord portal in an area where the UC digital service is operating. This recommendation came from evidence provided by Sarah Seeger, Head of Customer Accounts at Curo Housing Association, who suggested that a 'landlord portal' would save a lot of time, allowing landlords to deal with simple enquires. The National Housing Federation said that a landlord portal should “allow a two-way flow of information between landlords and the DWP”.

Lord Freud also said that it was "absolutely right" for the Department to consider a landlord portal, or something similar, and that data sharing with housing associations was "a matter of real importance".

With landlords’ rent being at risk from non-payment due to the direct payments of the housing element of UC to the claimant, I think a landlord portal is not just a matter of real importance but is imperative.

What worries me is that it has taken until 2015 for the DWP to even consider a landlord portal as a 'good idea'. Surely this is something that should have been included in the original design of UC and not just an afterthought to be picked up as a recommendation by the Work and Pensions Committee?

Let's not forget that local authority housing benefit services have been providing landlord portals for years. I start to wonder if the DWP is serious in liaising with local authorities as to the best way to administer UC – there must be something to be learnt from almost 35 years of administering housing benefit!

Simon Bailey IRRV (Hons) is a Director of ISCAS – contact him on simon@iscas.co.uk (www.iscas.co.uk)
Since my last article, I have been involved in a series of events which have taken me to the far-flung corners of the property tax universe.

I started in New York, USA, back in September, where the International Property Tax Institute (IPTI) held a joint event with the Council on State Taxation (COST) and the European American Chamber of Commerce (EACC). This was a workshop entitled ‘Property Taxes: a Curse or a Path to Sustainable Real Estate Growth and Profitability’, looking at issues of concern to corporate entities in both North America and Europe. Needless to say, the issues are very similar on both sides of the Atlantic and will be familiar to most IRRV members – the level of property tax, the accuracy of valuations, the frequency of revaluations, the time taken to deal with appeals, etc.

From New York I went to Indianapolis, USA, where the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO) was holding its annual conference. There I met up with Kevin Stewart and David Magor from the IRRV and we spent time together both at the conference and enjoying the local facilities, including the famous racetrack which hosts the Indy 500. I was involved in a number of sessions at the IAAO conference relating to international issues, including the use of external auditors in municipal assessment. This covered the need for external audit of the reassessment process and outcomes – it also covered the legal issues involved in external audits and looked at the detailed aspects of an external audit. IPTI has considerable experience of undertaking independent, external audits of revaluations and other aspects of property tax systems, and we have recently been engaged to perform another audit exercise in South Africa.

In October, I attended the annual conference of the Australasian Valuers-General (VGs), which was held in Adelaide, South Australia. This was a very interesting conference, with a number of external speakers providing a variety of insights into different aspects of property taxation. I was there primarily to talk about the recent international benchmarking study that IPTI had undertaken for the VGs, but I also made a presentation on global property tax issues. As always, the VGs ‘work hard and play hard’, so we had a very enjoyable trip to the Barossa Valley to sample the local wineries as part of the experience!

From Adelaide I flew to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where I was one of the main presenters at a two week course on eminent domain (compulsory purchase). The course included a number of local speakers who spoke about Saudi law and practice. I was there primarily to provide information about how eminent domain systems work in other countries, but also to speak about property valuation methodology. There are some large schemes of eminent domain taking place in Saudi Arabia at present, including a new metro system in Riyadh. There are also some interesting property valuation issues in the cities of Mecca (Makkah) and Medina.

I got back to London in time to chair the annual ‘Rating Question Time’ towards the end of October. This event provides an opportunity for rating practitioners to question senior representatives of the main stakeholder groups on business rates. As readers of this journal will know, there are plenty of controversial issues concerning non-domestic rates at present, and the event was both lively and informative.

IPTI held a workshop in Ljubljana, Slovenia in October, entitled ‘Modernizing Property Taxation in CEE Countries’. This attracted delegates from several countries in central and eastern Europe. Speakers from those countries shared their experience of a number of common themes, including the generally low level of revenues collected from the
property tax, the over-taxation of business properties, stalled property tax reforms and a variety of intergovernmental issues, such as what needs to be included in legislation, who should do what in connection with policy, administration, collection, etc., and the role of communities in property tax reform. Also in October, IPTI participated in the South African Council of Property Valuation Professionals (SACPVP) annual conference in Durban, where we presented a paper on how technology has – and will – change the property valuation industry. This topic is becoming an increasingly important subject around the world, particularly in the light of rapid advances in the available technology.

Towards the end of October, I joined IRRV colleagues Moira Hepworth and David Magor in Dublin, Ireland, where we are working on a joint IRRV-IPTI project concerning the Irish Valuation Office (IVO). The IVO has been undertaking a series of ‘rolling revaluations’ of commercial properties throughout Ireland and preparing new valuation lists containing updated valuations of the properties concerned. The IVO is also responsible for maintaining both the new valuation lists and the old lists relating to areas that have not yet been revalued – this ‘revision’ work is, of course, an important part of the IVO’s responsibilities. The project includes looking at the work that the IVO has done so far in both revaluations and revisions, and providing advice on how they might make best use of international experience in completing their tasks over the next few years.

In November I was back in Canada, and we had the largest group of participants we have ever had at the two-module, four-day training event we ran in Toronto on the role of the expert witness in property valuation disputes. This course, run in conjunction with the Osgoode Hall Law School, provides both the legal framework and practical application of the skills required of an expert witness in this type of litigation.

We had another successful Caribbean conference in Montego Bay, Jamaica during November. This event brought together a large number of people from both Caribbean countries and further afield. We had local, regional and international speakers presenting papers on current property valuation and construction topics. One of the highlights was entertainment by the ‘Kidz Palace Preparatory and Pre-School’ during the opening ceremony, which involved very young children in local costume dancing, which charmed all those attending. We were also pleased that the Honourable Robert Pickersgill, MP, the Minister of Water, Land, Environment and Climate Change was able to provide the keynote address at the conference.

The Minister and officials in Jamaica

I then flew back to Canada, where I chaired a series of consultation meetings in different parts of Ontario involving the provincial valuation agency, the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and representatives of property taxpayers who own some of the largest, special purpose, industrial properties. These properties, as readers will be aware, provide some of the most challenging types of property to value in any part of the world. MPAC are in the process of preparing for the next reassessment (revaluation) of properties in Ontario and, as part of this process, they are undertaking a substantial consultation exercise which involves, among other things, talking to the owners and professional advisors of these specialised properties. Two of these meetings were held in Thunder Bay, Ontario, which was an interesting and unusual place to visit.

By the time you read this piece, I will have returned to Saudi Arabia to deliver another training course on eminent domain. This time, the course will be held in Jeddah instead of Riyadh, where we were in October. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia’s Shura Council, the body that advises the government on legislation, has recently endorsed a tax on undeveloped land in the urban areas of the country, which is intended to encourage development.

In January, I participated in the annual property tax conference IPTI runs in partnership with COST. This event, held in San Antonio, Texas, is focused primarily on the needs of corporate taxpayers and their professional advisors. We will also be talking about the new COST-IPTI International Scorecard which we plan to prepare in 2016.

We are planning to involve more jurisdictions in the next scorecard, in response to requests we have received from a number of countries around the world.

Also in January, IPTI was invited to co-chair a conference in Trinidad and Tobago which considered the issues involved in implementing a property tax revaluation in the country. We were approached by the Trinidad and Tobago Group of Professional Associations Ltd – known as the Professional Centre – to participate in this event. We will also be having meetings with the Ministry of Finance to discuss both the policy and practical issues involved in this exercise.

Looking further ahead, we have provisionally arranged to hold a joint event with the IRRV and the Commonwealth Heads of Valuation Agencies (CHOVA) as part of the IRRV’s Scottish Conference in September 2016. Look out for details about this IRRV-CHOVA-IPTI event in due course.

Paul Sanderson is President of the International Property Tax Institute
The long term impact of Universal Credit

Universal Credit cuts support for working families

Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) researchers have concluded as part of the IFS Green Budget 2016 (produced in association with ICAEW and funded by the Nuffield Foundation), a series of pre-emptive cuts means that introducing Universal Credit (UC) will, in the long run, reduce the generosity of the benefit system – including to working families, in a reversal of the original intention. But it will still do a lot to help make work pay for many of those who currently face the most severe disincentives.

It is the first comprehensive analysis of UC’s effects since the cuts to its generosity announced in the July Budget – cuts that were left untouched in the Autumn Statement, despite the U-turn on cuts to tax credits. The analysis focuses on the long run impact of introducing UC. Transitional measures mean that existing claimants will not see their entitlements cut at the point when they are moved onto UC.

Considering first the long run impact of UC on work incentives, the IFS finds that it strengthens financial work incentives only slightly on average, but this masks significant effects in both directions for different groups:

- UC will dramatically reduce the number facing very weak financial incentives to move into or stay in work. The number of people who lose more than 70% of their pay in taxes and withdrawn benefits (or would lose that much if they moved into work) will fall by two-thirds, from 2.1 million to 0.7 million.
- UC will tend to weaken the incentive for single parents to be in work, and to strengthen the incentive for couples to have one person in work (rather than none or two). On average, working single parents will effectively keep 8% less of their earnings under UC than under the system it is replacing, because of the way UC is withdrawn as their earnings rise (a disincentive to work made significantly greater by the July Budget cuts).
- Looking at the financial incentive for those in work to earn more (e.g. by increasing hours of work or moving to a better paid job), UC again tends to strengthen incentives where they are currently weakest. The 800,000 working individuals who would currently keep less than 20p of an additional pound earned (of whom 600,000 would keep less than 10p) would all keep at least 23p if the long run UC system applied now.

Turning to the long run impact of UC on incomes:

- introducing UC will cut annual benefit spending by £2.7 billion in total (this is on top of other benefit cuts such as the four-year freeze to most benefit rates). When first proposed, UC was intended to be more generous than the current system, but cuts to how much recipients can earn before their benefits start to be withdrawn have reversed this.
- among working households, 2.1 million will get less in benefits as a result of UC’s introduction (an average loss of £1,600 a year) and 1.8 million will get more (£1,500 average gain). Among the 4.1 million households of working age with no-one in paid work, one million will get less (average loss of £2,300 a year) and 0.5 million will get more (average gain of £1,000 a year).
- working single parents and two-earner couples are relatively likely to lose, and one-earner couples with children are relatively likely to gain. Among those currently receiving one of the benefits being replaced by UC, working single parents would be over £1,000 a year worse off on average if the long run UC system applied now, but one-earner couples with children would gain over £500 a year on average.
- owner-occupiers and those with assets or unearned income are relatively likely to lose, but working renters are relatively likely to gain. This has the implication that UC will likely focus support more on those with long-term (rather than just temporary) low incomes, but it also weakens the incentive for some to save.

There are many other changes associated with UC that could also be significant. Expanding job search conditions to more people and removing the need to start new benefit claims when moving into work could act to increase employment and earnings. Early evidence suggests UC has had a positive impact on employment among the small group already affected, but it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from this about its impact when fully in place. Moving towards monthly benefit payments to one member of the household and removing direct payments to landlords may be riskier.

Robert Joyce, an Associate Director at the IFS and an author of the report, said: “The long run effect of UC will be to reduce benefits for working families on average –
“Although the ‘national living wage’ will significantly increase the incomes of some low earners, it is projected to have very little impact on official measures of poverty or household income inequality in 2020/21.”

IFS projection of impact of benefit cuts on poorer households
In a further report, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Fund, IFS project that whilst strong employment growth had lifted the incomes of poorer households, forthcoming benefit and tax credits cuts are set to have a negative impact on those same households:

• looking beyond 2015/16, if the OBR’s macroeconomic forecasts are correct and policy plans remain the same, then the IFS project median income will grow by an average of 1.5% a year over the five years to 2020/21
• earnings growth is the most important factor driving this projected growth in average living standards. This is a modest rate by historical standards
• the IFS projects that there will be no growth at all in real incomes at the bottom of the distribution over that period on average, partly as a result of planned cuts to benefits. As a consequence, absolute poverty across the population as a whole will be unchanged, despite the real growth in average income. However, projected trends in absolute poverty diverge significantly between different groups
• absolute pensioner poverty is projected to fall from 14.9% in 2015/16 to 10.8% in 2020/21, as labour market participation among older people increases, private pension income grows, and the state pension rises in line with earnings as a result of the ‘triple lock’. If the state pension were instead increased in line with CPI inflation, absolute pensioner poverty would still fall, but by less, to a projected 13.0% in 2020/21
• by contrast, absolute child poverty is projected to increase from 15.1% in 2015/16 to 18.3% in 2020/21. This increase is driven entirely by a sharp rise in poverty among families with three or more children, which is itself the result of planned tax and benefit reforms
• because the IFS projections suggest that incomes towards the bottom of the distribution will fail to keep pace with median income over this parliament, relative poverty is projected to increase. Again, there are sharp differences across family types – relative pensioner poverty is projected to be roughly unchanged, while relative child poverty is projected to rise.

Although the ‘national living wage’ will significantly increase the incomes of some low earners, it is projected to have very little impact on official measures of poverty or household income inequality in 2020/21. This reflects both the scale of the policy and the fact that gains from the national living wage are focused on individuals with low hourly pay, many of whom do not have particularly low household incomes (e.g. if they live with a higher earner).

Changes to council tax in Scotland
Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has announced plans to make the council tax in Scotland more progressive and to end the country’s nine-year council tax freeze, if the Scottish National Party returns to government after May’s Holyrood election. She has set out plans that would allow councils to then be able to increase council tax by up to 3% a year from 2017/18.

In addition, the Scottish Government would increase the tax level on the highest four bands of property value by up to £10 a week for top-band taxpayers, generating £100m a year, earmarked for education.
Using your data

Despite greater flexibility to raise income, councils still have to make more savings and ensure their budgets are spent as efficiently as possible.

As local authorities across the country are being squeezed by ever tighter budget cuts, the availability of smarter, cheaper technology continues apace. Senior leaders are searching for high quality, reliable data that can deliver insights to help them do more with less. A recent report from Policy Exchange shows how important data is to policy and strategy teams within local authorities, and how it can help them to make better decisions across the council. The good news? You already have the data sets. Revenues and benefits departments have access to some of the most detailed information available on income, employment and poverty. This data has always been available to use and now some authorities are unlocking its full potential.

What is your data saying about you?

Local authority revenues and benefits departments are the gatekeepers to hugely detailed data sets on housing benefit and council tax. To outsiders, the language of acronyms like SHBE and CTRS, and the highly technical world of benefits processing, belie a hitherto secret world of laser sharp insights and an inarguable, consistent version of the truth.

The reality is that the unrelenting focus on finding savings and the harsh requirement to make even more cuts puts revenues and benefits teams, and the data sets they produce, at the heart of decision making. Policy and strategy teams need to know how this data can be used to deliver improved outcomes, and how targeted, preventative support is a more cost-effective way to fight poverty.

Understanding the true impact of welfare reforms

Since the Welfare Reform Act 2012, housing and council tax reduction scheme data has been used by a small number of councils to report on benefits processing and provide important statistics on the impact of welfare policies to policy and strategy teams. Typically, this information has been backward looking, and the impact of policies has been assessed in isolation.

More recently, a revolution in predictive analytics is enabling local authorities to look at the cumulative impact of current and future reforms. We know, for example, that the National Living Wage and increased income tax allowance will have an impact on council tax support payments, but until now we’ve had only a limited ability to model exactly how.

Similarly, local authorities understand the importance of taking mitigating action as a less generous Universal Credit (UC) and a higher benefit cap loom on the horizon. Some councils are now learning how to unlock their own data to understand which individual households will be impacted, and how.

Speaking at an IRRV event recently, I was struck by the frustration of people in revenues and benefits who wanted information to help them to plan, and were waiting for the DWP to give it to them. Past experience suggests they can be in for a long wait, and even then the information won’t necessarily give them everything they need.

Together with the Welfare Reform Club, Policy in Practice has worked with a number of local authorities to help them to begin to unlock the power of their benefits data. We worked recently with Bath, Bristol, and others to model prospective council tax support schemes, and helped North Herts to do this, taking into account planned changes to tax credits that were, thankfully, reversed. We have helped Birmingham, Hounslow and others to model the impact of UC, the benefit cap and reforms all the way through to 2020.

Yet despite making these strides, we believe we are only just scratching the surface.

Credit where it’s due

Revenues and benefits teams own these detailed datasets on income, employment and poverty. In a small number of leading councils, they are the powerhouse driving a shift towards data-centric and outcome-focused services, enabling their council to do more – or the same – with less.

By working together and sharing knowledge, through the IRRV, the Local Government Association and Policy in Practice’s own Leading Lights Network, other councils who are not yet doing the same can avoid reinventing the wheel and build on the good work that’s already happening in this area.

Deven Ghelani describes how revenues and benefits services can punch above their weight

Deven Ghelani is Director with Policy in Practice. Go to policyinpractice.co.uk
Universal Credit
Implementation and roll-out: Challenges for Scotland
22 April 2016

IRRV Scotland is pleased to announce this major conference, taking place on Friday 22nd April 2016, and being organised at the request of local authorities, housing associations, other organisations and IRRV members across Scotland.

The advent of Universal Credit heralds the biggest change in welfare benefits delivery in a generation and its likely impact on service delivery in local authorities is hugely significant.

In addition to the latest information about Universal Credit implementation and roll-out, this conference will look in detail at preparations local authorities, housing organisations and the third sector should be taking – giving practical examples, the UC digital rollout, the devolution of UC administration powers to Scotland, the outcome of UC Support Trials across Scotland, improving outcomes for vulnerable people, the treatment of Housing Benefit overpayments after UC rolls out and the likely long-term effects of Universal Credit and the wider Welfare Reform programme.

The Department for Work and Pensions will update conference on progress with the delivery programme and with key speakers, this conference is a must for all local authority, housing association, third sector and other key professionals.

The programme includes:

- **The roll-out of Universal Credit in Scotland – An update from the Department for Work and Pensions**
  Invitation accepted – speaker TBC

- **Universal Credit – The Digital Roll-Out – A Case Study**
  John Cunningham, Service Manager - Benefits & Financial Assessments, East Lothian Council

- **Universal Credit – the Devolution of Administrative Powers**
  Kirsty Le Grice, Scottish Government

- **Universal Credit Support Trials – outcomes and lessons for the future**
  Greg Colgan, Head of Customer Services and IT, Dundee City Council
  Fergus Walker, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Argyll & Bute Council

- **The treatment of Housing Benefit Overpayments following Universal Credit Implementation**
  John Giblin, Consultant

- **Improving outcomes for Vulnerable People**
  Nicoya Palastanga, Universal Credit Partnership Manager, West Lindsey District Council

- **Where now for Welfare Reform?**
  Peter Meehan, COSLA Adviser.

The conference will be chaired by Les Robertson, Service Manager – Revenues, Fife Council and Chair, IRRV Scottish Revenues and Benefits Forum. There will also be a panel session with speakers and also Jim McCafferty, IRRV National President.

*To encourage organisations to send a number of team members, every third delegate from the same organisation comes entirely free of charge.

As places are limited, early booking is recommended.

**Fees:**
The conference will be invaluable to all local authority, third sector, housing organisation and other practitioners, including Managers, Team Leaders and team members. It represents excellent value for money, with conference fees starting at only £125 + VAT.
Revenues and Enforcement Conference & Exhibition

24 & 25 May 2016 – Majestic Hotel, Harrogate

The Revenues and Enforcement Conference will take place on the 24 and 25 May 2016. This year, the event returns to the Majestic Hotel, Harrogate after a break of four years. The conference will address a wide range of issues affecting practitioners working within Revenues and Enforcement. This is a pivotal year for non-domestic rate and speakers with cover the chancellor’s announcements in the March budget and the draft rating lists to be released in September. In addition, speakers will review the latest developments in enforcement and the review of council tax reduction schemes. Please visit our website to book your place.

PROGRAMME:

24 MAY

09.00 REGISTRATION & COFFEE
09.00 EXHIBITION OPENS
09.55 OPENING OF CONFERENCE
10.00 Implications of the NNDR Review
Andrew Hetherton, Director, Business Rates, GL Hearn
10.45 Rate Retention: 2016 and Beyond
Richard Harbord, Managing Consultant M.R.F.UK LTD - Public Finance Consultants
11.30 REFRESHMENT BREAK
12.00 Review of Council Tax Reduction Schemes
Jude Bevan, Revenues & Benefit Service Manager, South Gloucestershire Council
Kevin Stewart, Local Taxation & Benefits Manager, Wealden DC
13.30 LUNCH
14.30 When to exercise discretion in awarding Relief
Alistair Townsend, Revenues & Benefits Service Delivery Manager, Milton Keynes Council
15.00 The Growing Importance of Sundry Debts
Ian Ferguson, Durham CC
15.30 REFRESHMENT BREAK
16.00 Local Taxation Fraud: Is there an Issue?
Debbie Dansey, TEICCAF Local Government Lead & Head of Fraud Services INTEC for Business Ltd
16.30 Data Protection and Freedom of Information
Ibrahim Hussain, Solicitor, Act Now Training
17.30 END OF DAY 1

25 MAY

09.00 REGISTRATION & COFFEE
09.30 Performance Awards Winners
Revenues Team – Southwark LBC
Benefits Team – East Riding or Yorkshire Council
10.30 REFRESHMENT BREAK
11.00 Where are we on the ‘Taking Control of Goods’?
Speakers TBC
13.00 LUNCH
14.00 EXHIBITION CLOSES
14.00 A Technical Update and the Prospects for the Profession through to 2020
David Magor, Chief Executive, IRRV
Gary Watson, Deputy Chief Executive, IRRV
15.30 CLOSE OF CONFERENCE

* This discount will only be made available to IRRV Members and Forum, Benefit Advisory or Organisational Members. Delegates must be from the same organisation and bookings must be made at the same time.

Fees:

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<tr>
<td>IRRV Member</td>
<td>£165 plus VAT</td>
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