Seaside special - Annual conference highlights

- Performance awards winners
- Tandem triumph
- What future for council tax?
Directors Notes

The largest number of delegates in recent years, the largest exhibition ever and an awards dinner which encapsulated the togetherness of the Institute.

Celebrating Excellence

All the positives were there this year at the Annual Conference in the City of Brighton and Hove – the largest number of delegates in recent years, the largest exhibition ever and an awards dinner which encapsulated the togetherness of the Institute. The conference papers were excellent and some sessions exceeded all our expectations. The Institute is grateful to the speakers who gave so much to make the week a resounding success. In saying this I must not forget the delegates: several speakers commented upon the quality and depth of the questions.

The Chairs handled the new approach to staging with ease and the Institute’s staff were as professional as ever. It is a pleasure to see the companies and other organisations displaying their wares, ranging from the traditional golf competition to the challenge of the attractions on the pier! This is an important part of conference. The delegates worked hard during the day so relaxing and networking with colleagues in the evening is invaluable. The Institute also used conference to further its educational objectives. Events were held to discuss the syllabus review and to thank those involved in the development of our vocational qualifications. A very special event was the hosting of a dinner for the prize winners in the Institute’s examinations (see page 6).

The major event of the week was the Awards Dinner. The largest ever number of applicants entered this year’s challenge. For the first time they were given the opportunity to exhibit more detail of their submissions in the Awards Village. The Institute continues to be impressed by the quality of the entrants and to thank those involved in the event. His versatility knows no bounds. It was a good week – my thanks and congratulations to all those involved.

Some sessions exceeded all our expectations… not forgetting the delegates: several speakers commented upon the quality and depth of the questions.

The conference was a quality event. It is a pleasing sight to see the companies and other organisations displaying their wares with such enthusiasm. Of course I realise they are selling their products, but this year the approach to existing and potential customers seemed to have that little bit extra.

Director David Magor
Call for overhaul of enforcement fees

An up-front fee paid by creditors to initiate warrant enforcement action is one of the ideas that has been put to the Lord Chancellor.

The Lord Chancellor’s Department has issued Warrant Enforcement: Towards a New Fee Structure, the second report of the Advisory Group on Enforcement Service Delivery. The report, which does not represent government policy, offers 10 recommendations to the Lord Chancellor on fee principles and fee structures for those conducting warrant enforcement business.

Recommendations include:

- The payment by the creditor of an up-front fee to initiate warrant enforcement action, which should be recovered from the debtor when enforcement is successful.
- Following the up-front fee and initial action and report that it covers, fixed fees should be charged for further enforcement activities relating to enquiries, letters, visits and securing goods.
- Fees for the removal, storage, valuation and auction of goods should not be fixed and shall not include charges to cover hourly attendance rates.
- No fixed ‘abortive removal visit’ fee.
- Enforcement agents should be able to charge a fee for establishing and administering a repayment plan; this should be proportionate to the size of the debt, and is to be recoverable from the debtor.
- The report points out that a future regulatory body should have relevant powers to ensure that abuses of process within the sector do not occur, but that flexibility will be necessary to enable professional enforcement agents to exercise their own best judgment according to the circumstances of each case.

Details can be found at http://www.lcd.gov.uk/enforcement/enfadgp/enfees.htm#part1

Acacia to grow into national address database

Key bodies including local government and the Valuation Office Agency are to work together to develop a single national infrastructure for Great Britain of definitive addresses and related property information and mapping. The resulting work will support thousands of key services from government and business.

The six member bodies participating in the Acacia programme are HM Land Registry, Registers of Scotland, the Local Government Information House, Ordnance Survey, Royal Mail and the Valuation Office Agency.

Secretary of State announces radical housing benefit reforms

Work and Pensions Secretary Andrew Smith has announced the introduction of a standard local housing allowance, varied by family size and location, for tenants in the private rented sector.

The new allowance will be introduced in a number of pathfinder local authorities during 2003-04. The Department for Work and Pensions will evaluate the impact of the reforms and, depending on the results, may roll them out nationally.

Announcing the measures to MPs, Mr Smith said: “Tenants who find a suitable home with a rent less than the standard allowance will be able to keep the difference. Because they’re simpler, standard local allowances will speed up the claims process, reducing the uncertainties people face as their circumstances change and make trying a job a more attractive option.”

Legislation round-up

Local Government in Scotland Bill

The Bill puts Scottish local authorities under a duty of best value and extends the powers of the Accounts Commission for Scotland and Scottish ministers to encourage failures in best value to be identified and addressed. It provides more freedoms and flexibilities for local authorities over commercial trading activity and removes the requirement to submit specified activities to compulsory competitive tendering. It also provides a new framework for performance reporting to local authority stakeholders which leaves decisions about the ways and means of publication to be decided at local level.

Debt Arrangement and Attachment (Scotland) Bill

The Bill provides a scheme under which individuals may arrange for their debts to be paid under payment programmes; creates a new diligence in relation to corporeal moveable property owned by a debtor; makes special provision for the use of that diligence in relation to property kept in dwelling houses; and abolishes poindings and warrant sales.

Latest consultation papers

Access to Information in Local Government:


Entitlement cards and identity fraud

Consultation is open until 10 January 2003 on whether the government should introduce an entitlement card scheme. A universal entitlement card scheme would, amongst other things, establish for official purposes a person’s identity so that there is one definitive record of an identity which all government departments can use if they wish. It could help people gain entitlement to products and services and help public and private sector organisations to validate a person’s identity, entitlement and eligibility to work in the UK. The 145 page consultation document can be found at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/cpd/entitlement_cards.pdf

Inside News is compiled by Moira Hepworth

IRV Policy and Research Projects Officer
Scotland Comes Out On Top

The Scottish Association was this year’s winner at the IRRV Inter Association Golf Competition, held in July at the Coxmoor Golf Club. Nine teams took part, from the East Anglian, East Midlands, Lancashire and Cheshire, Northern Counties, Scottish, Thames Valley, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside Associations, plus the President’s Team.

Battle of the Roses

The Yorkshire and District Association retained the golf Roses Challenge Cup in September, beating the Lancashire and Cheshire Association by 107 points to 98 points despite the match having to be abandoned after 10 holes due to wind and rain. Individual prize winners were Gordon Dalby and Richard Mason.

Yorkshire achievers

At the recent meeting of IRRV Yorkshire and District Association David Brook and Rachel Horsfield were presented with full Level III qualification certificates.

Lancashire and Cheshire members recognised in memorials

A dedication ceremony was held in the summer in memory of the late Bill Shaw, a long-standing member of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association. Two acres of Lower Grass Wood, Grassington, North Yorkshire, has been dedicated to Bill’s memory in support of the Woodland Trust. The dedication was made possible by generous donations from his family, friends, colleagues and his employer, Anite Public Sector.

As a mark of recognition for Bill’s work with students, an annual prize will be awarded in his name to the highest achieving student from the Association’s area sitting the IRRV exams in June. A similar award will be made for students sitting the December exams, commemorating the late Alf Alker.

Correction: Modern Apprentices

The editing of Graham Sayers’ article (IRRV Insight, October 2002, page 27) wrongly gave the impression the council does not pay its Modern Apprentices’ salaries. In fact, they are employed by Warrington as permanent staff. But the Learning Skills Council pays for their NVQ training costs up to the age of 25.
The 2005 revaluation will be very different to its predecessors, both in form and – I hope – result. But to adhere to the much stricter and advanced timetable which the Valuation Office Agency has agreed to operate, many of the key decisions are having to be taken in 2003. Indeed some of them have already been completed and actioned.

Following the Next Steps Review of the 2000 Revaluation and the very thorough investigation of the non-domestic rating process by the Treasury Select Committee, the Valuation Office Agency has been charged with providing a wholly new approach to the next rating list. The principle of ‘right first time’ has been adopted by the Agency as an article of faith. Whether or not prior agreement of some, or indeed any, of the new entries in the 2005 rating list will prove feasible in the compressed time scale, the compilation of the list will require a change of mindset for all involved.

The much delayed Local Government Bill would seek to change the penalties for failure to complete, or indeed complete fully, a rent return. Instead of criminal proceedings, the penalty would be the much more easily enforceable and effective civil proceedings with the prospect of an ongoing fine.

The VOA is tempering this bigger stick with the carrot of a rolling programme for the issue of rent returns from January 2003, and a restriction of issue to those premises where it believes significant rental evidence exists. Furthermore, if the information technology teams can act in time, there will be the opportunity to supply the information through MERI (multiple electronic rental information) which will allow ratepayers with multiple occupations to transmit rental information direct to the VOA database. However this still has to be tied into the conventional issue of rent returns system, and has yet to be satisfactorily interfaced with the computer systems of those who hold the information.

Meanwhile, the preparation for the 2007 council tax revaluation continues apace with the probable and radical move towards CAMA (computer assisted mass appraisal) methodology, as Diane Leggo describes on page 17 of this issue.

While the application of CAMA to the valuation of domestic property is well proven, its relevance to commercial property is far less credible. The complexity and variation of commercial hereditaments would require a model so hugely complex that it would appear impracticable within current technology, particularly in the highly sophisticated UK property market.

Understandably, the all-new ministerial and civil service team at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for local government finance is keen to identify ways of streamlining the system. But they should not forget that the UK government extracts a far higher proportion of property tax than any other industrialised nation and that the average non-domestic rate bill is not only 20 times higher than its domestic council tax equivalent, but is a relative cost in an intensely competitive market place. The ability to fine tune rate liability and offer a genuine appeal regime must be maintained if the system, which accounts for 6% of total tax revenue, is to survive.

The government’s persistence in pressing for a further transitional scheme in 2005 does nothing to simplify the tax or make it fairer – rather the opposite.

In the October edition of the IRRV’s Valuer magazine, Richard Wackett adds a further ingredient to this bubbling cauldron with his proposition for self-assessment for non-domestic rates. This is a radical proposal which warrants further consideration in the context of a rapidly advancing IT capability, and its accessibility through the information highway to most commercial property occupiers.

By all means let us have change, but let us make very sure that any new proposals are fully thought through, properly resourced, and allowed to be implemented within a realistic time scale. The government has yet to begin to address the problems, notably under-resourcing in the VOA, which were highlighted by the Treasury Select Committee. Until this is done, all talk of radical improvement has a hollow ring.

“Let us have change, but make sure it brings improvement, says Tom Dixon”

Tom Dixon is the new President of the IRRV and is Managing Director of Dixon Rankin Chartered Surveyors.
Prize winners celebrated at conference

Examination prize winners from the December 2001 and June 2002 sessions were honoured at the Institute’s National Conference in Brighton last month. At a dinner hosted by President Gary Watson, and attended by Director David Magor, representatives from Council and teaching centres, staff members and guests, the candidates who had achieved the highest results were presented with their prizes – cheques and a bottle of bubbly – and their certificates. The presentation was made by the President and by Suzanne Dean, Chairman of the Education and Membership Committee.

The dinner was held in the cellars of the Old Ship Hotel on Brighton seafront (a one-time haunt of smugglers, but now, of course, frequented by much more reputable patrons). Gary Watson spoke of his pleasure at having been able to show his appreciation of three groups of people on successive nights of conference: Association representatives, staff and students – represented by the prize winners. Larry Goddard – the first candidate to pass the Institute’s new Professional Project Assessment scheme – replied to the President’s toast on behalf of the prize winners.

The prize winners had been invited to attend two days of the conference, including the Awards Dinner. Their places at that dinner were sponsored by Risk Management Partners of Norwich, and we were delighted that Arthur Morris of Risk Management – a long-standing friend and supporter of the Institute – was able to come to the dinner.

Grades galore: pictured with IRRV Head of Professional Services Sue Stevens on the left and Education Committee Chairman Suzanne Dean and Institute President Gary Watson on the right are: left to right: Hilary Harvey, Fareham BC; Llinos Thomas, Charnwood BC; Jacqueline Wood, Charnwood BC; Shirley Yates, Penwith DC; Elizabeth Snell, City and County of Swansea; Tracey Richards, Penwith DC; Elizabeth Keevil, City and County of Swansea; Julian Morgan, City and County of Swansea.
Insight
November 2002

Book Review

Without a silver spoon: the self help story of an underdog by Eric Trevlyn Gibbons.

At 420 pages, this is quite a sizeable book to review. But Mr Gibbons turns out to have had quite a life. I thoroughly enjoyed this story of how the author - who started with a poor education and living in considerable hardship - overcame it all to succeed in everything he set out to do. The book spans 70 years and the author worked in three continents.

Eric Gibbons is a member of our Institute, having qualified in 1948. He mentions his attendance at the bi-monthly meetings of the East Midlands Branch of the then Rating and Valuation Association.

For myself, having studied financial management in local government historically over the years, I found the period when he worked for Mablethorpe and Sutton Urban District Council fascinating. The various transactions and events described show the sort of local authority that few of us will have experienced. Institute members should note that Mr. Gibbons was promoted to rate collector at the age of 16 and his salary rose from £31 to £55 per year. The post involved the collection and handling of around £30,000 per annum.

At this time the Finance Sub Committee met monthly to examine lists of unpaid rates and gave instructions in each case. The author notes how this led to members and their friends occasionally obtaining prolonged credit. The District Auditor ordered the process to be left to officers and this led to three members being summonsed and the gaining of a certain amount of unpopularity. At the age of 18 Mr Gibbons was acting as the council’s bailiff as well. References to the Public Works Loan Board and Anchers Loan Tables brought back memories.

His career was interrupted by war service and the local authority was not keen on assimilating him back after his seven years away. He found that his job on his return was not as senior or demanding as the one he had left before the war. He completed his final examinations in 1948 and that was the springboard to a remarkable set of academic achievements for a man who left school at 15. In the end he was to achieve a BSc(Econ), MSc., and a PhD.

Mr Gibbons went on to start his own business, then entered teaching and academic life culminating in consultancy and research overseas. The book not only chronicles his own remarkable career but also the support and help of his wife and daughter.

It is very detailed and sometimes a little slow moving, but is a fascinating and moving account of one man’s struggle against adversity.

Richard Harbord
IRRV Council Member

Without a silver spoon: the self help story of an underdog (hardback) is available price £16.40 (+ postage and packing £2.80) from the New Ashford Bookshop, Tel: 01233 621172

IRRV Scottish Benefits Conference 2002

The Park Hotel, Falkirk
6 and 7 December 2002
Sponsored by Sx3

Speakers will include:
➔ Malcolm Wicks MP Under Secretary of State at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
➔ Paul Howarth Head of Housing Support Division, DWP
➔ Peter Meenan Head of Benefits, Glasgow City Council
➔ David Mayor IRRV Director
➔ Peter de la Mothe Principal Benefits Policy Officer, Camden LBC
➔ Garry Campbell Chief Revenues Officer – Service Development, Glasgow City Council
➔ Julie Holden Benefits Manager, Mid Sussex District Council and IRRV Council Member
➔ Colin Holden Benefits Trainer
➔ Carol Cutler Head of Financial & Exchequer Services, Harrow LBC and IRRV Council Member

Subjects covered will include tax credit and their impact on benefits, Supporting People, the appeals system and the future of housing benefit policy.

The conference will be invaluable to all benefits practitioners, especially Heads of Benefits, Team Leaders and team members. It also represents excellent value for money, with seminar fees starting at only £165 + VAT for non-residential delegates (both days) and £215 + VAT for full residential delegates, with discounts for block bookings.

For more details and a booking form contact Fraser Macpherson, IRRV Development Manager, 27 Riverside Drive, Dundee, DD2 1AD;
T/F: 01382 460525; e: irrvscotland@aol.com

Valid for IRRV CPD Points
From Here and There

Tweaking the tables

The rules for comprehensive performance assessments are changing all the time, which does not inspire confidence, says Pat Doherty

Comprehensive performance assessments (CPA) are wending their way to a weary end, with the results for unitary and single tier authorities expected to be published in December.

The Audit Commission is presently working through the results of CPA to iron out any anomalies before placing councils in a league table position. According to the former Director of Inspection, Paul Kirby, there "will not be any surprises for councils about their results."

Mr. Kirby has also said "We will not apply rigid formulas that deliver skewed results. We are systematically working through the framework and adapting the rules which seem to deliver results out of kilter with the larger picture." He added that "The changes to weightings for different services do not affect many councils, and where they are affected they are generally moving in to better categories."

Authorities will receive a draft judgment and all supporting data in mid November and their final judgment on 9 December with results being made public on 12 December.

It seems to me that this process does not reflect well on the whole process of CPA. The methodology has been constantly changing since the start - here we are now at the end of the first tranche and the methodology is still being worked on and will be tweaked if the results do not look right. We still do not know whether there will be four or five bands or what they will be called.

It would seem that the Audit Commission is drawing up a different framework for the ranking of district councils from that of the upper tier authorities. It may take up to two years before the CPA league tables for districts are produced.

It is likely that the assessments will take a different shape from that of the upper tier authorities because the Improvement and Development Agency will play a major role through the use of peer reviews, which it has been developing for some time. It is also likely that self-assessment will play a greater role in the process.

The rest of the review will be based on two thematic inspections looking at environment and housing. From our perspective I have no doubt that benefits will feature in the housing block.

The consultation paper on CPA for district councils may be out by the start of next year. However, the ODPM’s office states that the IEG (2) statement is more than simply a means to attract further government funding. The government is looking for councils to provide evidence of action, not just words, in taking the e-government agenda forward. Councils are asked to demonstrate that they have a realistic plan of action and expenditure to meet targets for e-government by the 31 December 2005 deadline.

The corporate engagement of members and senior officers in IEG plans should also be demonstrated. Progress in implementing e-government should be described using or adapting the model of the local e-organisation set out in e-gov@local, specifying progress against each of the elements.

The report should also provide details of how local citizens are receiving tangible benefits from the changes, including data on the actual and expected take up of e-enabled services.

Funding

A second payment of £200,000 will be available from government for each council that submits a satisfactory IEG (2) statement showing they have made good progress since last year and that they are using, or have firm plans to use, the first grant of £200,000 to good effect.

Implementing Electronic Government

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has issued guidance to English councils in developing their Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statement for 2002.

IEG (2) statements should summarise the progress that authorities have made over the last 12 months in implementing e-government, whilst reflecting the key elements of the draft national strategy for local e-government, which was published for consultation on 8 April 2002.

The statement should also describe each authority’s rationale for the role that it is expected e-government will play in the wider drive to transform local authority organisation and service delivery for the benefit of all citizens and customers.

The guidance is set out in five parts:

(a) Vision
(b) Local and national priority outcomes and services
(c) Self-assessment of the local e-organisation
(d) Resources, and
(e) Risk assessment.

The IEG (2) statement should also complement the self-assessment approach to CPA being developed by the Audit Commission. Councils are asked to use the IEG (2) statement to set out the role they expect e-government to play in each key service area and in the corporate management of the organisation. Statements will need to refer to each authority’s community strategy, local performance plans and corporate plan.

Implementation

The implementation of IEG (2) statements should be monitored by the ODPM to ensure that councils are making good progress and that they are using, or have firm plans to use, the first grant of £200,000 to good effect.

Content

The report should demonstrate that the IEG (2) statement is more than simply a means to attract further government funding. The government is looking for councils to provide evidence of action, not just words, in taking the e-government agenda forward. Councils are asked to demonstrate that they have a realistic plan of action and expenditure to meet targets for e-government by the 31 December 2005 deadline.

The corporate engagement of members and senior officers in IEG plans should also be demonstrated. Progress in implementing e-government should be described using or adapting the model of the local e-organisation set out in e-gov@local, specifying progress against each of the elements.

The report should also provide details of how local citizens are receiving tangible benefits from the changes, including data on the actual and expected take up of e-enabled services.

Publication

The government expects local authorities to make IEG (2) statements accessible to all and to publish them on local websites. It follows that the statement should be written in a way that can be readily understood by the public, partner organisations, elected members,
Rewards for Prosecutions

Circular HB/CTB F22/2002 was recently released and one of the issues raised is where a couple have made a claim for housing benefit or council tax benefit, given false information and both have signed the declaration that the information provided is true and complete. They are both interviewed under caution, and have admitted to not telling the truth on the application. If both are subsequently prosecuted the advice given in the circular is that only one sanction reward is applicable as there is only one case.

This seems strange to me as the sanctions rewards are intended to encourage authorities to prosecute benefit fraudsters. In the above scenario authorities would normally prosecute both parties. Prosecutions are extremely time intensive and costly. If two people are involved then two interviews are undertaken, two lots of information have to be laid before the court, two summonses issued and two people prosecuted.

The DWP does not perhaps appreciate the position fully because its agencies would only prosecute one person - but, of course, unlike housing and council tax benefit they only have one claimant. Only receiving one reward where two people should be prosecuted is not an incentive to local authorities - it is a disincentive. Surely this is not what was intended?
A year of change in Scotland

Ann Thomson gives an update on the many changes taking place on the local taxation scene

It's been an eventful year for local government finance. One of the main events was the Local Government Committee Report, which came out in February. On council tax, the committee's conclusion was that the tax was sound. But it did make two recommendations: that the Executive should put in train a council tax revaluation in Scotland; and that the full council tax should be levied on second homes. It also put forward the idea for Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

We now have the Local Government Bill in Scotland. The overall aim is that the Bill will put in place a framework to allow councils to provide a better, more responsive public service. There are three core elements - a statutory basis for community planning, powers for local authorities to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the duty of best value.

The Bill was introduced to Parliament in May this year. Executive and other amendments will be introduced at stage 2 and the Bill itself, all being well, will commence in April 2003.

Council tax collection and more

One of the main changes which many councils introduced in 2001-02 was early billing. Legislation was amended and the timing of the order was brought forward to make this possible. Through early billing and the range of other measures, councils are making significant and steady improvements in council tax collection.

In 2001-02, the in-year collection rate in Scotland breached 90% for the first time. All but one council maintained or improved their collection rates between 2000-01 and 2001-02 and two of the councils with the lowest collection rates in 2000-01 showed the greatest improvement in 2001/02.

A consultation paper is being drafted on council tax for second homes in Scotland. This is likely to cover whether:

➔ the current 50% council tax discount for second homes should be removed or reduced;
➔ the current 50% council tax discount for unfurnished long-term empty properties should be removed or reduced;
➔ councils should be given discretion to alter the level of discount or whether a mandatory level should be proposed; It will also cover how council tax raised from reducing or removing discounts should be distributed between authorities - whether retained locally or spread across areas.

Non-domestic rates

The three main events coming up are the small business rate relief scheme, Business Improvement Districts and preparation for the 2005 revaluation. Each is at a different stage.

Research shows that rates are a higher burden for small firms and the relief scheme is designed to redistribute the rate burden within the business sector. To this end, the cost will be met by non-domestic ratepayers with a rateable value above £25,000. A maximum of 3% on the poundage will be added for these larger businesses.

We have recently had a series of useful meetings with business organisations and with representatives of the IRRV to try and iron out some of the practical issues of implementing the scheme, such as the interaction with other reliefs and the application process.

We will shortly be producing a draft business leaflet, draft guidance for local authorities including a template application form and draft legislation to comment on.

In England, proposals for business improvement districts have been published in the draft Local Government Bill. It is likely that a similar proposal will form the backbone of our consultation.

The non-domestic rates revaluation in 2005 may seem like a long way away to many but not to the assessors responsible for implementing the revaluation. Preparation is slowly starting for the 2005 revaluation and will build as the date gets closer.

So where will we be this time next year?

➔ We will be at the start of a three-year grant distribution cycle
➔ The Local Government in Scotland Bill will have commenced
➔ Poinding and warrant sales will no longer exist
➔ The new Debt Arrangement and Attachment Bill will be in place
➔ The small business rate relief scheme will be in operation. And that's only the highlights!

Ann Thomson is Local Taxation Policy Adviser at the Scottish Executive. This is an edited version of the address she gave to the IRRV Scottish Conference in September.

Kerry Robertson of Aberdeen City Council won the prize for the best Introduction to Council Tax paper at the June 2002 Technician exams. She was presented with her certificate at the Scottish Conference by IRRV President Gary Watson (left) and Scottish Association President Mike Peterson.
Ticket to ride

IRRV President Gary Watson and Director David Magor kicked off this year’s conference with their London to Brighton tandem ride for charity.

New President and Council

Annual Conference saw Tom Dixon taking over the chain of office as IRRV President. Tom now heads a Council that has its first ever Technician member - Maureen Neave. Also newly elected to Council was Peter Scrafton. Those Council members who were re-elected in this year’s elections are: Roger Messenger; Tom Dixon; Barbara Culverhouse; Richard Guy; Bill Lovell; Suzanne Dean; Carol Cutler; Richard Harbord; Alan Titheridge. Those who have now retired or stepped down from Council are Roger Young, Brian Hardy, Kate Adams and Bruce Jones.

Maureen Neave is Benefit Manager at Vale of Glamorgan County Borough Council. She has been an Executive Member of the South Wales Association since 1993, was Chair of the Association in 1996-7 and has been Secretary since 1999. She was a Distance Learner Lecturer in Law of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit from 1998 to 2000 and was co-author of Distance Learning material for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Law during that period. Peter Scrafton is a Solicitor and Principal in Private Practice. He is an Executive Member of the Metropolitan and Home Counties Association and has been a co-opted member of the Law and Research Committee since 1989. He has been a speaker at the Institute’s national and international conferences and a contributor to publications and journals. Has carried out parliamentary and international work for the IRRV and is a co-instigator (through the IRRV) of the Compulsory Purchase Association.
Looking for value

Council tax banding, business rates transition and the future of local government itself were all debated at the Institute’s Annual Conference in Brighton last month. Kate Miller reports

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 360,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

What next, Gary asked? “We’ve got to continue to work with government and with other bodies”, he said. E-government, benefit reform and improvements to the council tax and rating systems were all on the agenda for the IRRV to address.

Gary noted that the IRRV had held its Annual Conference in Brighton in 1989, in the thick of preparations for the community charge. This must have seemed like ancient history for the fresh-faced young man who would go on to be a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Assembly’s dissolution. It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 360,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

What next, Gary asked? “We’ve got to continue to work with government and with other bodies”, he said. E-government, benefit reform and improvements to the council tax and rating systems were all on the agenda for the IRRV to address.

Gary noted that the IRRV had held its Annual Conference in Brighton in 1989, in the thick of preparations for the community charge. This must have seemed like ancient history for the fresh-faced young man who would go on to be a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Assembly’s dissolution. It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.

Looking for value

Local authorities will soon be ranked by the Audit Commission in one of four categories of performance, from poor to good. Opening this year’s Annual Conference at the Brighton Centre, President Gary Watson bravely asked IRRV members how they would rank their Institute.

“Do you feel you’re getting good value from your subscription?” he asked. It was a genuine question and the Institute is certainly aiming to deliver what members need and want.

At the AGM, there was support for the creation of three faculties and this new structure will shape the future of the Institute. Gary also noted some of the external recognition that IRRV is getting, such as its role in the past few months as a special adviser to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the rating review (before the Assembly’s dissolution). It has also been awarded a 160,000 euro grant from the European Leonardo fund for work to develop an understanding of valuation processes and certification in Europe.
Insight
November 2002

Annual Conference

Performance Awards Dinner

Guest speaker Boris Johnson MP kept the audience entertained

Benefit Team of the Year, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Anti-Fraud Team of the Year, London Borough of Greenwich

Revenues Team of the Year, Wolverhampton City Council

Best Valuation Initiative, Northern Ireland Valuation and Lands Agency

Best Use of Technology, Guildford Borough Council

Best New Initiative, London Borough of Harrow

Best Use of Technology, Guildford Borough Council

Benefit Team of the Year, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Anti-Fraud Team of the Year, London Borough of Greenwich

Revenues Team of the Year, Wolverhampton City Council

Best Valuation Initiative, Northern Ireland Valuation and Lands Agency

Best Use of Technology, Guildford Borough Council

Best New Initiative, London Borough of Harrow

Guest speaker Boris Johnson MP kept the audience entertained

Performance Awards Dinner

Insight | November 2002 13
Revaluation and transition

“I am determined to support the Right First Time initiative in the next revaluation process and am sure that authorities will welcome the greater transparency”, the minister said. “It makes good sense to me to have a transition scheme to phase in the impact of this revaluation on individual bills”.

These remarks were strongly challenged by IRRV Council members. Brian Hardy said the implication of Right First Time is almost an insult - “the VOA is not trying to get it wrong first time”. Tom Dixon asked why the government had not taken on board the recommendations of the Treasury select committee, in particular to increase funding of the VOA.

The minister said the Right First Time strategy was a way of realistically reducing the volume of appeals, not a criticism of what had been done before. He did give a commitment to go back and look at the budget for the VOA.

Pat Doherty asked why there was any need for permanent transition at all and referred to the system in Northern Ireland where transitional relief had been confined to a simple, three year programme. “Now we have regular revaluations, if revaluations are doing what they’re supposed to be doing, what possible justification is there for transition”? Pat asked.

Chris Leslie did not have a direct answer to that, but he did promise to look at what had been done in Northern Ireland.

Return to domestic rates?

A warning that the government’s current plans for a council tax revaluation could lead to political disaster came in a paper from Andrew Harrop, of the New Policy Institute’s Centre for Council Tax Reform.

“In some parts of the country, revaluation will result in two thirds of properties being in band A - making council tax effectively a flat rate tax. Poorer households already pay a higher proportion of their income in council tax than richer households do, and this could get worse after the revaluation,” he said.

To avoid a public outcry, the straightforward solution would be to introduce new bands at the bottom and at the top.

“But splitting bands is still just maintaining the status quo”, he said. “Should we do something more fundamental and move to a system more like the old rating system”? Perhaps it would be fairer if council tax bills were linked to the individual property’s market value.

However, this would lead to bills ranging from £250 up to £5,000 or so for a house worth £500,000. A minority of people would see very high bills - but they would be a very vocal and powerful minority.

He also noted that there would be high differentials in local taxes paid around the country. While house prices vary hugely between, say, London and Yorkshire, the differences in incomes are not that great. So regional banding may be needed.

“An affordable council tax system may be possible only if there are geographic variations”, he concluded.

Is a return to rates politically acceptable or does equitable taxation have to mean local income tax? Ministers have not wanted to look at local income tax, but they may have to in 10 years time because of the problem of rising council tax becoming unaffordable”.

Fear and fiddled figures

Comprehensive performance assessment will not deliver any real improvement, because it is only based on fear, the conference heard from Michael Greenwood, Chief Executive of Tameside MBC.

Local authorities are worried about being classified as weak – to me, that is not a good basis for improvement. “Arbitrary targets do not drive improvements, they just change behaviour. People don’t know how to make improvements, so they fiddle the figures instead”.

He argued improvement in performance can only come from services changing the way they do things. Tameside has trained 2000 staff in continual improvement and is already achieving high quality and low costs in its revenues and benefits services. Its cost per benefit claim, for example, is now £28 – against an average best quartile cost of £48. “Other councils are welcome to process benchmark against Tameside’s revenues and benefits service,” he said.

But he also questioned whether the intensive process of CPA was sustainable in the long run. “Best value is already disappearing below the horizon. Will CPA one day do the same?” he asked.
Local government in decline?

Tony Travers, Head of the Greater London Group at the London School of Economics and an Honorary member of the IRRV, raised the question of whether local government itself was disappearing below the horizon. "Local government is Britain has a long and glorious history but is now perceived to be in decline from its days of power," he said. "However, in a world of quangos, it is still the only organisation operating locally that is consistent, effective and legitimate."

"We are a highly centralised country in which it is hard for local government to survive", Tony said. His analysis was that increasing centralisation is inevitable, when the public demand the same level of service all over the country. Whenever anything goes wrong, the call is for "the government to do something".

"But total central government control is impossible," he said. Political parties know that and now favour giving power back to trusted organisations, such as foundation hospitals.

But local authorities "are not immediately the recipients of this new localisation," he noted. "For local government to revive as a leader and funder in its communities it needs greater financial autonomy," he said, as well as the "freedom to fail" and an end to political outrage over a "postcode lottery" whenever services are found to vary in different areas. Crucially, it also needs public opinion behind it.

Further reports of papers and parallel sessions at the conference will appear in issues of the IRRV's Benefit and Valuer magazines.
The winners of this year’s ‘Sky’s the Limit’ Direct Debit Challenge received their awards at a special reception before the IRRV Gala Dinner. Amongst the VIPs were IRRV President Gary Watson, who presented the winners with their awards, and two Harris Hawks - Ringo and Jake. Direct Debit, which is run by BACS Ltd, sponsored the IRRV Dinner for the first time this year.

Nine local authorities were recognised with awards for their achievements in increasing their council tax and business rates collections by direct debit between July 2001 and July 2002. North Warwickshire BC scooped two awards – the Best Marketing Campaign and the Eagle council tax award. Bassetlaw DC won in the Most Innovative Use of Direct Debit category and the overall council tax increase winner was Crewe and Nantwich BC.

Ken Brown, Local Authority Manager at Direct Debit, said: “The standard of entries to this year’s awards was as high as ever, and I’d like to thank all the council teams that entered for their hard work in increasing their direct debit sign-up. I hope that this year’s winning campaigns will have sparked other councils to look at entering next year’s Challenge for themselves”.

North Warwickshire’s winning campaign had a seasonal theme based around the turn of the year and new year’s resolutions, highlighting that paying your council tax by direct debit is one new year’s resolution that you can keep. The campaign was launched in January, and carried through to March to coincide with the National Direct Debit Spring Marketing Campaign.

The council also secured coverage in its local press and on local radio, as well as putting posters up in a number of public places to maximise the effectiveness of the message. All of this led to the council’s direct debit sign-up increasing by 15%, to reach a penetration of nearly 60%.

The winners of the ‘Sky’s the Limit’ Direct Debit Challenge 2002 are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Local Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hawk - Council Tax Increase</td>
<td>Crewe &amp; Nantwich BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osprey - Council Tax Increase</td>
<td>Rotherham MBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kestrel - Council Tax Increase</td>
<td>Inverclyde Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falcon - Council Tax Increase</td>
<td>Leeds City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condor - Council Tax Increase</td>
<td>Huntingdonshire DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Rates Increase</td>
<td>Uttlesford DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Entrant Award - Council Tax</td>
<td>Kerrier DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Innovative Use of DD Award</td>
<td>Bassetlaw DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Marketing Campaign Award &amp; Eagle Council Tax Increase Award</td>
<td>North Warwickshire BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you would like to find out more about this year’s winners, or want to enter next year’s awards, contact Dawneth Rhoden at BACS Ltd on 020 8951 7137 or e-mail dawneth.rhoden@bacs.co.uk.
A modern revaluation

Diane Leggo describes how the VOA is aiming to use technology to achieve a more fair and open process

The council tax system has been in place since 1 April 1993 and has generally been widely accepted by the public. But with the passage of time, values and relative council tax bands have become outdated, leaving individuals questioning their liabilities. There is a pressing need for revaluation.

The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) will embark on a series of revaluation programmes over the coming years, starting in Wales where the new council tax lists will come into effect on 1 April 2005, and later in England where the new lists for 21 million properties will go live on 1 April 2007.

The environment is now very different from the early 1990s. We are expected to provide a transparent process to the citizen and a more efficient interface between central and local government, all of which can be achievable through e-government.

Many countries employ a computer assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) system to help gain consistency and uniformity across a wide range and number of properties. Such systems derive property valuations from the data held on the system. They typically use combinations of multiple regression analysis and statistically derived indices, as well as the more usual approach of comparable properties.

Our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Valuation and Lands Agency have been investigating this process for some time and now have considerable experience in this area and well-developed statistical standards by which systems can be judged for accuracy and robustness.

CAMA systems are also widely used in European Community countries, Scandinavia, Australia and, more recently, some former eastern bloc countries. So this is tried and tested background technology, but each system also has to be crafted to reflect the prevailing property market and taxation regime.

The key to the successful operation of a CAMA, and indeed any valuation system is the availability of appropriate property related data. We are mindful of the need to explore fully the options for data sources and the potential of a CAMA system and have been working with consultants on a business review to help develop a structured approach to an option appraisal. Many organisations, both in the private and public sector, have been contacted through the research phase.

While the project is at an early stage, it is clear that many public departments have a desire to work more closely together to derive access to common information databases. There would appear to be the potential to make significant progress, where clear advantages can be demonstrated in value for money and improved service delivery.

With less than one year to go before the start of the first ever council tax revaluation in Wales, we are actively collecting information to ensure that the new list will be in place come 1 April 2005. This information relates to the physical attributes of properties, for example where alterations have taken place but no existing banding review has occurred - currently banding reviews only happen once a property has been sold. A variety of methods are being used to collect information, including questionnaires, digital mapping, our own records and inspections. A full CAMA supported revaluation will probably not be possible within the timescale, but we aim to build upon our existing systems to ensure that the 1.3 million properties are valued on time.

The Agency’s recent publication of the current council tax lists on its website (www.voa.gov.uk) was a significant step forward in providing greater access to members of the public. We anticipate that when a CAMA system is finally established it will be web-integrated so that individuals will be able to provide us with information, query bandings and see how the banding scheme was arrived at, all through the Internet.

With the certainty of regular revaluations - as outlined in the current Local Government Bill - the VOA and its partners in central and local government should begin to see the longer term benefits of investing in an end-to-end process which serves policy making, billing, banding and enquiries from individuals. While this may not be wholly achieved by 2007, we hope that the foundations will be laid for continuous improvement, which will allow us to build confidence with council tax payers. Ultimately we want them to view the system as demonstrating fairness, accountability and certainty.
Trust your instincts

There are well-organised frauds out there, so don’t be afraid to challenge something that doesn’t stack up, Sean Langley urges practitioners

Many rating practitioners may be closely examining their procedures in the wake of recent allegations about a scam in London, centred on Camden LBC.

The Sunday Telegraph (28 July 2002) reported that Camden was being cheated, in an organised scam involving traders being offered a significant rates reduction, in return for a share of the savings made. Properties were claimed to be temporarily empty when they were in fact still trading, and were recorded as vacant, with the resultant three month rate free period and subsequent 50% empty rate reduction. Fraudsters told the Sunday Telegraph they had the assistance of an official at the council and the paper has passed its dossier to the Metropolitan Police. Camden told the paper: “We are determined that where corruption exists in the council we will root it out.”

Nearly two years ago, I reported something similar to the IRRV’s Forum service. At another London borough, where I had undertaken an assignment, a scam had been unearthed regarding void properties. Claims had been made that the properties had become vacant some 12 months earlier than originally claimed, resulting in the council having to make significant refunds. It was successfully proven in two cases that these claims were fraudulent. Two people were jailed for their parts in the fraud, although the judge was certain (and I happen to agree with him) that an ‘insider’ must have been involved, who was never found.

That borough was not especially lax - I found its working practices were very similar to those at many other authorities. So what can be done? The list will be endless if you try and cover all eventualities. But, to start, some simple steps can be taken:

✓ Consider the extent to which information taken over the telephone, e-mail, Internet should be used. In the event of a refund arising, it may be advisable to insist on a claim being made in writing. In such cases, do not act purely on faxes, as they can disguise documents that have been tampered with.

✓ Do not refund monies to third parties without the express written agreement of the ratepayer.

✓ Retrospective changes to ratepayer name, vacation date and the temporary application of reliefs, should be double verified by another officer, perhaps an external inspector. It should not be the same combination of officers in every case.

✓ Ensure that filing is kept up-to-date and secure, to minimise the risk of documents going astray. A document management system would clearly be an advantage.

✓ Ensure that, particularly with refunds, there is a stringent means of verification before actioning - insisting that officers complete check-lists to maintain compliance.

✓ Again with refunds, consider the use of direct to bank credits, particularly where payment has been made via direct debit, standing order etc, to minimise the risk of monies going astray.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it should at least get you thinking - and, indeed, probably applies as much to council tax as rating.

Unfortunately, in the smaller authorities, business rate administration has few personnel, and some of these suggestions may be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, the sheer fiscal size of business rates can make it attractive to fraudsters and should persuade local authorities that they need to act - and sooner rather than later to preserve credibility.

Most important though, is to ensure that you have sufficient quality control and performance management in place. I strongly believe that these ‘rogue’ practitioners that have acted as insiders are very rare, but we must quickly spot that something is wrong if one of our staff is involved!

We should also trust our instincts if something doesn’t feel right. Don’t be afraid to seek the assistance of audit or, indeed, the fraud section - whose experience and expertise in such matters may well prove invaluable - and don’t be afraid to challenge something that doesn’t stack up.

At the end of the day, we may need encouragement in our private lives to stick our necks out but, in the business world, managers have a responsibility to do so before it is too late!
Universal Government
A Corporate Infrastructure without Departmental Compromise
For more information visit our Web site or call 0113 244 1404.

www.comino.com

IT Round-up

Anite supplies Supporting People solution

Anite Public Sector has been awarded a contract to supply a specialist tool to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), to assist local authorities in implementing the Supporting People programme.

The Supporting People Client Subsidy Tool (SPCST) has been designed to aid local authorities in calculating the amount Supporting People clients will have to contribute for the services they receive and how much subsidy will be required from the ODPM. This will play a crucial role in allowing the ODPM/Treasury to budget correctly, with subsidies expected to be in the region of £600 million.

The SPCST tool, which will be provided free of charge to all local authorities with social care responsibilities, will play a key role in informing users of the SP services about pending changes. In February 2003, the system will manage the notification process in distributing letters to around 400,000 users of SP services, informing them of the changes in funding arrangements and whether they will have to contribute.

Greek goddess set to deliver e-voting

Anite Public Sector, Consilia and VoteHere Inc. have set up a specialist consortium to facilitate e-democracy in the UK. The Athena Consortium (named after the Goddess of Wisdom and patron of Athens, the birthplace of democracy) will start by supporting the e-voting pilots in May 2003.

All of the partners within the consortium have a track record in supporting e-voting. In 2000, Consilia carried out one of the earliest e-voting pilots with Bury MBC, whilst VoteHere Inc. supported Swindon BC in its e-voting pilot in May 2002, which resulted in over 4,000 people voting on-line. Anite Public Sector supported Harrogate BC in presenting its election results over the Internet in a recent pilot. The consortium has also teamed up with Citizens Online, a registered charity established to explore the social and cultural impact of the Internet on society.

New system offers lone worker protection

A unique personal alarm designed for the protection of lone workers such as rating inspectors and benefits visiting officers has been launched by Optyma Security Systems.

The new Insight system is a unique combination of GPS (Satellite) tracking and GSM mobile telephone technology, and delivers a reliable and effective link between the user and a constantly manned call centre. It also provides a cost-effective solution to an employer's duty of care in respect of lone workers, as outlined by the Health and Safety Executive.

The system comprises a GSM mobile telephone, which incorporates a special receiver module, and a discreet GPS alarm unit, which can be clipped to a belt or slipped inside a pocket. When the user requires assistance, he or she simply presses the button on the GPS unit and an alarm message is relayed to an operator at the call centre. Having acknowledged the alarm and knowing the location of the user to within five metres via the tracking system, the call centre then follows a pre-determined action plan, which is customised to the requirements of each user.

For more information about Insight, and the sales and leasing packages available please call Optyma on 020 8304 8635 or visit the Insight website at www.optyma.co.uk.
Cashing in

Councils do not have to accept a pile of copper coins in payment of a debt, says Paul Russell

What is the maximum level of coinage for legal tender in payment of a debt? Under section 2 of the Coinage Act 1971 (as amended by section 1 of the Currency Act 1983), the maximum amounts which the creditor is obliged to accept in tender of payment of a debt are as follows:

- Coins of cupro-nickel or silver above 10p (10p and 50p coins) - £10 maximum;
- Coins of cupro-nickel or silver 10p and below (10p and 5p coins) - £5 maximum;
- Coins of bronze (1p and 2p coins) - 10p maximum.

There is no maximum tender for £1 and £2 coins. Thus these must be accepted in tender of any amount.

There were many examples of payment being tendered in, for example, 1p pieces for community charge. Such instances are rare (fortunately) with regard to other debts. However, it can be useful to know the maxima when a debtor thinks that they are being clever with regard to a disputed debt. Any amount tendered, over the levels shown above, does not have to be accepted by the authority.

Private lives

There are widespread concerns about how article 8 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms might affect the ability of council tax inspectors and benefits visiting officers to do their jobs.

Article 8 states:

1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

So, local authority officers cannot intrude into private or family life (which must be widely interpreted) unless they can demonstrate both lawfulness and necessity. The latter expression must also be related to one of the purposes listed. Checking up on whether a discount or exemption is properly applied would not be enough to qualify for the "economic well being of the country" but the prevention of crime may well be enough to justify some minor intrusion on the part of the visiting officer or fraud investigator. Lawfulness is not difficult to establish. Council officers going about their normal and proper business are likely to be covered by the general powers under section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. However, the important issue is whether the work of the inspector or visiting officer could be described as being intrusive. If so, then it could still be breaching the rights under article 8.

In my view, the two key areas to examine are the apparent intentions of the individual and the reasonable expectations of that person.

Net curtains, closed curtains or blinds across a window would indicate that the individual intended to create a private place. Thus, any attempt to peep through a crack between the curtains could well amount to an intrusion. Conversely, simply looking through an un-curtained window, for the purposes of establishing whether or not a room is furnished/lived-in would not, in my view, constitute an intrusion.

The presence of a gate at the side of a property does not necessarily create a private place behind, unless that gate were locked or bolted from the inside. Letter boxes, on the other hand, would not be a point through which an individual could reasonably anticipate that someone would look. So these should not be looked through!

Dustbins are more difficult. The officer may wish to ascertain whether the nature of the rubbish indicated residence or otherwise. I do not believe that such an action would be considered intrusive. However, it could certainly be considered intrusive to read the name and address on correspondence in the dustbin.

In summary, to avoid any allegation of an intrusion under article 8, it is advisable for council officers to follow a set pattern:
1. Ring doorbell or knock and wait a reasonable time for an answer;
2. If there is no answer, undertake a general view through the window;
3. If the property appears to be unoccupied, then I believe it would not be intrusive to go to the rear of the property and take a general view through any un-curtained windows;
4. If there is still no evidence of occupation, then I believe it would not be intrusive to make a cursory inspection of the dustbin contents.

This is an area of the law which will take many years to become established. At the moment we can only adopt a set of guidelines which attempt to anticipate what the higher courts would say. Such guidelines should take into account the balancing of rights of the individual against the need to do the job. I believe that the above advice would be considered reasonable.

Paul Russell is a consultant and trainer. He can be contacted on paul_russell@virgin.net.

The views given in this column are personal views and should not be construed as a legal opinion.
Any chance of support?

Transitional housing benefit is ruling my life, says Julie Holden!

I cannot wait for April 2003. That date should see the end of transitional housing benefit (THB) - except in Wales where it hangs around for another year. THB has been one of the single most time consuming, confusing and unproductive projects that housing benefit has had the misfortune of being mixed up with.

I sit on various THB steering groups for the county, district and IT conversion. I seem to be the one link between all these different bodies which means largely I repeat myself to five or six different gatherings every month.

The providers still don’t understand the scheme and I find the regular requests from different social workers to explain the same issue over and over again maddening.

At the bottom of all of this, I am not sure that I fully understand what I should be paying for.

About 18 months ago I received a THB claim (which was totally valid) at £300 per week. This seemed outrageous at the time, but now with outreach schemes, this fee is fair to middling and I have received claims for over £700 per week. I have heard that some authorities are paying more than £1,000 per week and I must confess to being very nervous about this. This really does seem an awful lot of money for general counselling and support.

I have tried hard always to tie the charge back to the dwelling and security of the tenancy – a connection that many of the different advisers who have been dealing with the providers and tenants just don’t seem to grasp.

The guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions (the DSS at the time) is vague and seems to allow so much of these new amounts that I have difficulty refusing charges, even while harbouring concerns that sometimes the figures are just not real.

I seldom get a satisfactory response to my question: if housing benefit doesn’t pay it, how will this charge be met? I am also aware that often social services will step in and pick up part of the remaining tab if we determine that housing benefit should not be paying the whole cost, and this raises questions over the entire tenancy.

I have not been trying to catch people out, merely trying to ensure that THB pays for what it should and is not seen as a cow to be continually milked!

On 15 October, local authorities provided the first data for the ‘pot’ to be calculated. I am also advised by my Supporting People colleagues that, on their own guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), any benefit claims not processed before 15 December will result in their not being taken into account in April when Supporting People takes over the payments. Instead, they will be calculated the following October when the pot is re-examined. Providers who are accepted by the Supporting People team will get their money - but only so far as the resources in the pot allow for it!

This came as a bit of surprise to some providers when it was announced at a local liaison forum, as they still had not all reallocated their rental breakdowns and did not know how much they need from Supporting People. This is a worrying state of affairs.

The pot is soon to be determined and shared out, so if many providers still have not identified their need, it could come up very short indeed! The pot will be reviewed and updated, but to start the new scheme uncertain that you have enough money to meet the need - when providers have had three years to prepare - is a sad position to find ourselves in.

One of the groups I attend has been discussing how to capture and transfer the ongoing data. Locally, the contribution that the supported person must make to the charge, will largely be determined on whether they qualify for housing benefit or council tax benefit. The Supporting People team are looking to transfer our data regularly and wish to be informed if a person stops receiving benefit in order to change their arrangements.

How are we to do this, with so many different software packages within the county I have absolutely no idea. Supporting People are welcome to data-match with us, but there could be problems passing information every time a supported person starts or stops receiving benefit, without another manual system. It would also rely on the good nature of the housing benefit office as after April we stand to gain nothing from helping out.

Our own concern in April will be recalculating benefits net of THB. I hope that it all ironed out smoothly, otherwise we are looking at another problem, at a time when we have quite enough on our plates with tax credits and normal up-rating. So much for Supporting People – perhaps we need Supporting Benefit Managers!
New IRRV members

Corporate Members
Graeme Barnes, Business Rates Officer, Sunderland City Council
Jeremy Boyers, Tax Consultant, KPMG
David Brooks, Verification Officer, Bradford MBC
Cara Galea, Director, Stratford and Districts Ltd (Property Investment and Development)
Laurence Goldard, Head of Administration, London (NW) V
Hilary Harvey, Revenues Team Leader, Fareham BC
Sharon Jones, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Breckland DC
William Lamb, Surveyor, Cotton Thomas Cole
Ken Long, Fraud and Visiting Manager, Lewisham LBC
Julian Morgans, Senior Benefits Officer, City and County of Swansea
Abimbola Odusini, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Havering LBC
John Perkin, Senior Administration Assistant, Leeds City Council
Ian Proudfoot, Revenues and Benefits Enquiry Officer, Dewsbury DC
Andrew Rosewar, Senior Enquiry Officer, Ropley and Barntead BC
Peter Staveley, Director of Finance, Blackpool BC
Elizabeth Snell, Benefits Officer, City and County of Swansea
Jeremy Thomas, Associate Partner, Peter Long and Partners
Martin Wamsley, Deputy Team Leader, Lewisham LBC
Martin Webb, Senior Revenues Officer, City and County of Swansea
Sally Williams, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Liberata UK Limited
Shirley Yates, Benefits Manager, Crawley BC

Technician Members
John Paul Bead, Senior Officer, Brighton and Hove City Council
Rehana Begum, Customer Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Deborah Elaine Brakem, South Somerset DC
Sara Janet Brimble, South Somerset DC
Helen Burke, Team Leader, Sutton LBC
Simon Burlingham, Project Manager, Havering LBC
Ian Dawson, Revenues Assistant, South Staffordshire DC
Neil Frazer, Senior Benefits Officer, Southend on Sea BC
Tracy Fitzgerald, Local Taxation Assistant, Walsall MBC
Sarah Gaskin, Assessment Officer, Mid Sussex DC
Shahin Harper, Revenues Officer, Merton LBC
David Lewis, Valuation Executive, VOA, Manchester
Michelle Magowan, Appeals and Liaison Officer, North Tyneside Council
Adeleunie Doo, Consultant, Royal Castles Ltd
Lei-Lei Ann Raebum, Council Tax Officer, Orkney Island Council
Janet Raymoes, Team Leader, West Berkshire Council
Gary Raynes, Revenues Assistant, Denbighshire Council
Susan Rowland, Investigations Officer, Redruth BC

New Members

Gary Raynes, Janet Raymond, Orkney Island Council
Lesley-Ann Raeburn, North Tyneside Council
Michelle Magowan, Manchester
David Lewis, Wakefield MBC
Southend on Sea BC
South Staffordshire DC
Ian Dawson, Helen Burkwood, Sara Janet Brimble, Sunderland City Council
Brighton and Hove City Council
John Paul Bead, Shirley Yates, Benefits Manager, Crawley BC

Student Members
Heather Adleyni, Local Taxation Assistant, Savernacko DC
Syed Ali, Clerical Assistant, Tandridge DC
Kavin Ashenden, Benefits Officer, Merton LBC
Emma Baintridge, Benefit Adviser, Dudley MBC
Richard Bamborough, Debt Recovery Supervisor, Highland Council
Jason Beever, Benefits Assessment Officer, Canterbury City Council
Louise Bell, Control/tech Assistant, Liberata UK Limited
Janine Bentley, Benefit Assessor, Sedgemoor DC
Laura Bessell, Benefits Adviser, Bedford BC
Susanne Boyce, Benefits Officer, Tandridge DC
Elizabeth Brown, Team Leader, Invincyle Council
Neil Bullough, Court Officer, Reading BC
Rosemary Caddy, Revenues Assistant, Newark and Sherwood DC
Robert Clarke, Revenues Manager, King’s Lynn and West Norfolk DC
Peter Coe, Benefit Assessor, Greenwich LBC
Louise Cole, Senior Clerical/Trainee Assessor, Mid Devon DC
Sharon Coomes, Recovery Officer, Rotherham BC
Antony Cope, Benefits Quality Assurance Officer, Dorset DC
 Fiona Cowan, Benefits Assistant, East Dunbartonshire Council
Ingrid Cree, Clerical Assistant, Orkney Island Council
Ruth Crawford, Senior Recovery Officer, South Gloucestershire Council
Lisa Davis, Benefits Officer, Gloucester City Council
Elaine Day, Training Officer, Dartford BC
Angela Deegan, Benefits Officer, Gloucester C.C
Margaret Denham, Recovery Officer, Northampton BC
Jennifer Fedler, Fraud Officer, West Oxfordshire DC
Victoria Fisher, Benefits Assistent, Suffolk Coastal DC
Zoe Fletcher, Benefits Officer, Eastbourne BC
Linda Fiddes, Benefits Officer, Liberata UK Limited
Joanna Gateren, Benefits Officer, Winchester C.C
Keith Harding, Training Officer, Wandsworth BC
Tracey Harris, Senior Benefits Assistant, West Oxfordshire DC
Lisa Heath, Revenues Assistant, Newark and Sherwood DC
Sandra Hebbum, Training Officer, Wycombe DC

Dawn Herbert, Benefit Assessor, Poole BC
Melanie Holbourne, Team Leader, Winchester C.C
Lisa Hill, Senior Benefits Officer, Powys C.C
Martin Hoeg, Investigations Officer, Mandal DC
Richard Howson, Benefit Assessor, Rotherham BC
Lucie Howell, Recovery Officer, Barnsley MBC
Peter Hunt, Senior Telephone Officer, Wandsworth LBC
Kitty Huffman, Benefit Assessor, Sedgemoor DC
Michael Lyekkokopler, Appeals and Liaison Officer, Lambeth LBC
Amitabh Nagarajan, Benefit Assists, Harrow LBC
Marineet Juttla, Benefits Officer, Bedford BC
Hande Khambhala, Owayspayments Officer, Harrow BC
Ruzan Khan, Team Leader, Havercroft LBC
A. Mustapha Khemesis, Revenues Assistant, London Borough of Hillingdon
Christopher Kudy, Liberata UK Limited
Michael Lambert, Business Rates Officer, Guildford BC
Joanne Leighton, Clerical Assistant, Ashford BC
Jacqueline Lockley, Benefits Officer, Winchester C.C
Patricia Lodge, Benefits Officer, Gloucester C.C
Diane Lloyd, Revenues and Benefits Officer, Uttlesford DC
Cathie Magee, Revenues Assistant, Runnymede BC
Alison McDonald, Team Leader, North Lanarkshire Council
Paula Meagher, Benefit Assessor, Greenwich LBC
Maria McElhinney, Revenues Assistant, West Lothian Council
Kim McMillan, Credit Coordinator, North Lanarkshire Council
Tracey Manton, Senior Benefits Officer, Peterborough CC
Laaine Meadowcroft, Benefit Assessor, Stafford BC
Gail Morgan, Senior Clerical Assistant, West Lothian Council
Karen Morriss, Owayspayments Officer, Merton LBC
Chris Mounce, Benefits Assister, East Ayshbury Council
Andrew Pratt, Revenues Assessor, West Lothian Council
Anna-Marie Rain, Benefits Manager, Corby BC
Barry Raines, Billing and Collection Officer, Canterbury City Council
Oliver Rankin, Senior Revenues Officer, Angus Council
Amanda Reid, Benefit Assessor, Greenwich LBC
Alice Rhind, Teller, North Lanarkshire Council
Ceri Richards, Benefits Officer, Powys C.C
Nicola Rigby, Benefits Assessor, Preston BC
Kathleen Rix, Principal Revenues Officer, Bury MBC
Tony Robinson, Benefit Assessor, Hardings BC
Janette Russell, Senior Benefits Officer, Hillingdon LBC
Kelin Sandfield, Recovery Assistant, Ribble Valley BC
Lucy Savage, Assessment Assistant, Maidstone BC
Sunil Sharma, Policy and Quality Development Officer, Slough BC
Darren Shennun, Council Tax Assistor, Salisbury DC
Fiona Shephard, Revenues Officer, Angus Council
Niaz Simpson, Team Leader, Walsall BC
Caroline Sims, NDR Officer, Canterbury C.C
Richard Skelton, Senior Benefits Officer, DI Alamos DC
Matt Snow, Taxation Officer, Winchester C.C
Joelene Stammers, BIIIT Monitor, Liberata UK Limited
Alex Strong, Revenues Assistant, Guildford BC
David Thomas, Recovery Officer, Powys C.C
Robert Thompson, Benefits Officer, Kettering BC
Michael Timbs, Administrative Assistant, Liberata UK Limited

continued on back cover
A Career Move with Loads of Benefits

Our client, Anite Public Sector, is a fast growing and profitable Division of the FTSE 250 Anite Systems, and provides leading-edge software and services to Local and Central Government.

Continued growth, both organically and through acquisition, has created a number of roles within the Corporate Division for revenues and benefits professionals.

Anite offer excellent competitive packages and opportunities to considerably enhance your career with a market leader at the forefront of technology.

For more details please contact our advising consultant, Melanie Bennett, on 01457 861216 or 07776 472268.

Alternatively email your cv to to mail@thompson-consulting.co.uk, or post or fax to the following address: Thompson Consulting; 9 George St, Glossop, Derbyshire, SK13 8AY.

Phone: 01457 861216. Fax 01457 857000.
At IRRV Solutions, we know your business. And when you work with our consultants, you get the best. Our experienced consultants deliver:

- **Best Value and Performance Reviews**
- **Preparation for CPA**
- **Benchmarking and competitive analysis**
- **Improvement planning**
- **NVQ training programmes**
- **Management development programmes**

Whatever your business needs, from performance improvement programmes to tailor-made training and development, why not give **David Magor, Simon Horsington, or Ken MacNeill** a call. Find out why Solutions is the consulting company for Revenues and Benefits.