apse direct news

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Editorial

Onwards and upwards in 2014…

Well we survived 2013…. just.

To say it has not been an easy year for local authorities would be a bit of an understatement. For every £1 spent in 2010 councils will get just 73.6p from Government in 2013/14. Coupled with the council tax freeze this is a grim picture for council finances.

However the message that local councils have reached saturation point, when it comes to absorbing more cuts, seems at long last to be getting through to Government. Whilst there are no promises of jam tomorrow the welcome holding off of further cuts, in the Chancellors Autumn statement, provides a modicum of stability albeit tinged with the reality of the on-going impact of austerity.

I am pleased and proud that in spite of the challenges APSE member authorities have not been complacent. This year we have seen councils rising to the challenges evidenced by a spirit of municipal entrepreneurship. Rather than simply talking about service transformation and navel gazing over financial graphs APSE members have developed entrepreneurial responses. They have delivered behaviour change programmes to reduce the burden and demands on local services; been bold in pressing forward on regeneration projects, generated income through new initiatives, working with public and private sector partners, sought answers to the energy crisis through municipal energy schemes and looked for every possible route to secure the future of local public services. It is inspirational councils that formed the basis of the APSE awards for 2013 including our overall council of the year in service delivery South Tyneside who are featured in this edition of direct news.

2013 is also a tale of outstanding performance. Councils have never been able to leave their performance to chance and to luck. Our best and most improved performing councils, based on data from the UK's largest voluntary networking group, APSE performance networks, celebrated their success at our performance networks awards for 2013. Every finalist and every winner deserves to be recognised for their outstanding contribution in delivering high performing local public services.

As we move into 2014 I am confident that APSE is a strong and mature organisation fit to serve our members in these difficult times. APSE members are deserving of UK wide recognition for their ongoing delivery of outstanding local government frontline services. So it remains for me to say a huge thank you for your involvement in APSE during 2013 and on behalf of all the team at APSE to wish you all a very happy and successful 2014. Onwards and upwards for 2014!

Cllr Leon Unczur, APSE National Chair

Turning ambitions into action

South Tyneside was named Council of the Year in the APSE Service Awards 2013. Andy Whittaker, corporate lead for area management, describes how the council's ambitious vision for economic growth and improved life opportunities for residents has translated into action on the front-line

Above:Andy Whittaker

The first thing South Tyneside's lead member for area management and community safety, Cllr Tracey Dixon, did after we were presented with APSE's Council of the Year Award in Liverpool, was go to the depot and thank all our managers and staff for their hard work. As corporate lead on refuse, highways, grounds maintenance, community safety and street-scene, I am particularly pleased to win this award because it recognises the importance of front-line services and the contribution of people who are out there serving local communities every day.

I am also delighted because APSE as an organisation has been so useful in helping shape approaches to challenges we, like all councils, are facing. As well as using APSE's performance networks service and professional advice, membership enables us to network with other councils, test ideas, share best practice and learn from the experience of our peers. We can certainly learn from the achievements of the other councils shortlisted for the title (see box).

South Tyneside was shortlisted in several categories of APSE's 2013 awards – Best Public/Public Partnership, Best Community and Neighbourhood Initiative, Best Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Initiative and Best Transport and Fleet Service Team – and this reflects our work with partners as much as our own endeavours. South Tyneside Homes, currently carrying out a £180m housing investment programme, won the award for Best Housing and Regeneration Initiative.

With a 28% cut in funding and 25% reduction in staff, South Tyneside has had to take innovative steps to deal with difficult circumstances. Leader, Cllr Iain Malcolm and Chief Executive, Martin Swales, have spearheaded the council's ambitious 'Shaping our Future' vision for local economic growth and improved life opportunities for residents over the next twenty years. This has meant making the most sustainable use of assets and resources, while at the same time reducing the costs of management, energy and back office administration, reorganising services

and setting stringent performance improvement targets. The strategy has resulted in the council becoming £90m more efficient and moving from being the 27th most deprived local authority in England to 52nd.

Residents are now seeing the fruits of £1bn investment in housing, schools and state-of the-art libraries, community hubs and leisure facilities. Regeneration in the centre of Jarrow has created a better retail offer and new community pool. Haven Point, our brand new seafront pool and leisure complex, was recently opened by the Duke of Cambridge. Our '365 Vision' masterplan is turning South Shields town centre into a high quality, year round destination. The council is also providing support for businesses to take on 200 apprentices by March 2014.

Having worked for South Tyneside for the past 30 years and seen a lot of changes, I find it gratifying that such tangible achievements have enabled us to bring residents and staff along with us on our journey. Successful community engagement, education and campaigns are enabling us to take a 'demand management' approach, which encourages residents to do more for themselves and makes services more cost-effective. When we introduced alternate weekly refuse collection, for example, our residents understood what we were doing, thanks to good communications, and it has worked really well. Recycling has increased by 14% in the last 10months, which means we have reached our expected target ahead of schedule.

Our success has also benefitted from the Councils five Community Area Forums, which allow us to tap into local knowledge, involve residents in decision-making and match services to the particular needs of each part of the borough. Involving the Councils Members, Community Leaders and the voluntary sector is helping us gather intelligence at a local level which allows our services to react more quickly to environmental issues.

We are also boosting efficiency by sharing vehicles, resources and intelligence with partners. Our safer neighbourhoods teams are bringing police, community wardens and housing officers together to address the root cause of problems such as graffiti, wheeled bin fires, community safety and fly-tipping. There has been a 44% reduction in anti-social behaviour in the borough since 2009. The 'Bored in Boldon' project, which was shortlisted for the APSE Best Community and Neighbourhood Initiative award, brought together youth workers and other services to divert young people away from anti-social behaviour and into sports and vocational training. Some of the young people involved have become ambassadors for the project and are now training others.

Above: Cllr Tracey Dixon

Money is obviously tight right across the public sector, which calls for imaginative solutions. We have attracted funding from a range of sources, including £116m private sector investment in regeneration projects since 2010. We have a joint waste PFI project with Gateshead and Sunderland councils and are considering whether other services could be shared. A commercial approach means our fleet team generates income by offering vehicle servicing and MOTs to external customers.

Seeing the bigger picture means joining up the council's vision for the future with action on the front-line. This has resulted, for example, in linking energy efficiency measures that have saved £1,000 on some householder's bills with benefits to the local economy and running 'green gyms' and 'blue gyms' in parks as part of a borough-wide health and well-being strategy.

Things are not easy in any public sector organisations at present, but South Tyneside Council has made a commitment to economic growth and improved life opportunities and our front-line services and employees are fundamental to achieving this.

Authorities shortlisted for APSE Overall Council of the Year 2013

Bedford Borough Council
Broxtowe Borough Council
Caerphilly County Borough Council
City of Edinburgh Council
Conwy County Borough Council
East Riding of Yorkshire Council
Preston City Council
Renfrewshire Council
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

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Paying fair and square

Leader of Rochdale Council, Cllr Colin Lambert, explains why his authority has become the latest to introduce a 'Living Wage'

Above: Cllr Colin Lambert

At Rochdale Council, we decided our lowest paid workers deserved a fair wage and formally introduced a 'Living Wage' in October. Given the cuts in resources we face as an organisation, we are not doing this out of sheer magnanimity; we are doing it because we believe it is the right thing for the authority and our local economy as well as our employees. As community leaders, it also sets an example to other employers.

The Living Wage aims to pay workers enough to have a decent standard of living. It varies from the National Minimum Wage, set by government, which critics argue is not enough for people to live on. Some 435 lowest paid town hall staff are now receiving £7.26 an hour, which is almost a pound more than the current Minimum Wage. A full-time local authority worker in our borough who was previously on the Minimum Wage is getting an additional £38 a week, backdated to September, which amounts to £1,976 a year.

Although budgets are tight, our analysis showed that this was financially viable in terms of improved organisational efficiency and providing a boost for the local economy. According to campaign group the National Living Wage Foundation, 80% of employers believe that the Living Wage has enhanced the quality of the work of their staff, improved loyalty and customer service, reduced complaints and cut absenteeism by 25%. Statistics also show that the lowest paid people in the country spend a high proportion of their income in the local economy, so this will put thousands of pound into local shops and other businesses in the Rochdale area.

We are encouraging our partners and the business community in the borough to follow the council's example and so far they have been receptive. We would like to see our suppliers and providers signing up to the Living Wage. There are legal regulations to comply with, but where possible the requirement will be made part of council contracts with external firms.

The amount was set by Rochdale Council, as opposed to the Living Wage Foundation's recommendation of £7.45 an hour for people outside of London and £8.80 in the capital. This level allowed us to implement the increase in the current financial year and negotiations with unions about levels as of next April are continuing.

UNISON welcomed the move by Rochdale Council and is pressing employers nationally to introduce the Living Wage. The majority of councils and public service partners such as colleges schools, fire and police services in Greater Manchester are making this move. The Living Wage has been adopted by hundreds of employers nationally across every sector. This includes local authorities, educational and third sector organisations and private companies including KPMG and Aviva.

At Rochdale, we are proud that a fair day's work for a fair day's pay will be guaranteed for all staff to ensure our employees have the opportunity to provide a better standard of living for themselves and their families. Paying a fair wage shows we value the contribution of our staff and helps give individuals a sense of pride in what they do. We have had lots of positive comments about this move from the workforce, residents and traders who appreciate that this money is being spent at local businesses.

The Government needs to recognise that the Minimum Wage is not adequate. By paying employees the Living Wage, there is less claim on the public purse in benefits and associated costs and more money is distributed throughout the economy.

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£17,001-£20,000	£11.50
£20,001-£25,000	£14.00
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Selling power from municipal energy schemes

With more local authorities considering, or already developing, municipal energy schemes, and with the continued spotlight on domestic energy bills, more and more councils are looking into how they can maximise income on energy sales from their energy projects and/or how that energy can be used to supply residents in the local area. Adam Davidson explores some of the options available.

Selling via FITs or a PPA to a licensed supplier

The simplest of all options is to export the generated electricity to the grid and (where the facility is eligible for feed-in tariff (FITs) support) take the fixed FITs export tariff. However, this will likely generate the lowest income of all of the options. Alternatively, the Council could opt out of the fixed export tariff (and can do so once every 12 months) and elect to sell the power to a licensed supplier under Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). Where the facility is not accredited for FITs, the Council would have to have a PPA with a supplier in order to obtain the power sales revenue. Under a PPA, the Council may be able to negotiate a fixed price that is better than the FITs export tariff, or obtain a more market linked price (e.g. by reference to the day-ahead wholesale price). This option is how most existing municipal energy schemes obtain their revenue.

Private wire to a third party

Another option is to connect the Council's generation asset to a nearby large energy user, with the power going directly between the two and not entering the local distribution network. Under this arrangement, which would involve a PPA between the two parties, the Council would likely receive a higher price than it would exporting the electricity to the grid, while the consumer will pay less for the power used than it would otherwise pay (as there would be no use of system and other charges). Therefore, both parties are in a better commercial position. An active example of this is Cornwall Council's solar farm which has a private wire to the nearby Newquay Airport.

Direct PPA to a third party

We are seeing more examples of large energy consumers looking to buy energy directly from generators, even those they are not located close to each other, on long-term fixed price contracts. Under this arrangement, the Council would sell the power to the large energy consumer, who would in turn sell it on to its electricity supplier under another PPA. The supplier would then (in simplistic terms) re-sell the power to the consumer at the point of use, at the price paid by the supplier to the consumer under the PPA plus a mark-up to cover imbalance risk. This option allows the consumer to fix part of its energy costs over the long term, and the Council can receive some of this value via the PPA price. There are other ways of achieving this "Direct PPA" arrangement, which could include a more traditional sale of the power by the Council to the supplier, then by the supplier to the consumer, with there then being an agreement between the Council and the consumer along the lines of a "contract for difference" smoothing out the market prices the Council and the consumer may otherwise receive and pay.

Self-supply

Along similar lines, the Council can essentially use the power it generates in its own estate, even where that estate is not co-located with the generation facility, by "sleeving" the power through its existing supply contract. Under this arrangement, the supplier would buy the generated power at an agreed price from the Council under a PPA and then supply that power to the Council's estate at the price paid by the supplier to the Council under the PPA plus a mark-up to cover imbalance risk.

This option allows the Council to buy its own power at

a rate that is lower than the supplier would be willing to achieve, and at a long term fixed price, providing bill savings and security. Many electricity suppliers already have arrangements in their existing supply contracts with larger customers, such as Councils, allowing them to sleeve their own power (or power purchased from third parties) into the supply portfolio.

Supply to third parties

The most complex option is the Council supplying energy to local residents and businesses. This could involve the Council selling its generated power to an energy services company (ESCo) wholly or partly owned by the Council, which is a licensed supplier and which supplies that energy to local residents at a lower rate than other suppliers (on the basis that it pays less for the generated electricity than other suppliers would).

Clearly, the ESCo would need to obtain a supply licence from Ofgem and be able to comply with all of the relevant obligations, as well as putting all the necessary systems in place, all of which is costly and time consuming. However, there is the possibility of a number of Councils collaborating to create a single ESCo that serves all of their needs, and/or bringing in existing suppliers as joint venture partners, to spread the cost and risk associated with this option.

Conclusion

This article is by necessity a simplistic and cursory overview of the options available to Councils for selling power generated by municipal energy schemes. Some are more complex than others, and each has a different risk and reward profile, so each Council will have to take a view on what it wants to achieve with its energy programme and how it wants to meet those objectives. Councils would do well to consider each option, measuring them against the baseline of the fixed export tariff under FITs (where the project qualifies for FITs) or the lowest straight-forward PPA price available in the market (where FITs support is not an option). With the right ambition and advice, Councils are well placed to make good returns from their energy schemes.

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A hole in one

Stephen Finley, principal engineer in Rotherham's highway asset management team, describes the introduction of an effective way of carrying out permanent repairs as part of the council's comprehensive safety defect reduction strategy

Rotherham has a three pronged approach to highway maintenance. Firstly, we ensure the highway is safe, with eight area highway inspectors carrying out cyclic safety inspections, responding to reports and ad-hoc inspections. Secondly, we record none dangerous defects such as ponding, surface fretting, surface stripping to feed in to the planned works programme. Thirdly, we carry out highway maintenance on a 'Not Worst First' basis, which focuses on a programme of preventative maintenance and picks off the worst ones based on condition surveys, reports and consultation.

The highways team at Rotherham has 1,139km of roads to take care of, half of which are in rural areas, and a series of severe winters has revealed the fragility of our network. The number of safety defects increased from 10,138 in 2007/8 to 32,530 in 2012/13. At the same time, our overall highways budget is reducing in 2014/15. We are therefore implementing a safety defect reduction strategy that aims to achieve efficient use of resources in the long term through better planning, prioritisation and carrying out permanent repairs where possible.

Prior to implementing a new approach to permanent repairs, we had two priorities for dealing with safety defects. Priority A were actionable defects with a very high risk of harm requiring repair within four hours of identification. Priority 1 were 'normal' actionable defects requiring repair within 24 hours of identification. There were a number

of weaknesses in the method being used to do temporary repairs however. These included not always achieving a first fix, quality not being satisfactory and the number of repeat repair rising as a result. Safety defects were arising frequently at the side of existing repaired defects and it was deemed that this was not efficient use resources. We wanted to improve the planning of safety defect repairs, raise the quality and prevent future safety defects occurring close to existing safety defects.

In order to put some planning in place two new priorities were created. Priority X has a 48 hour response time to make a defect safe. Priority 5 has a 10 day response time and is a permanent repair. Our internal insurance team, external insures, external solicitors and barristers experienced in highway third party claims all took the same view that the risk of extending the safety defect repair time to 48 hours was acceptable.

Health and safety concerns over the traditional permanent repair method causing 'white finger' had stopped us doing permanent repairs in that way. So, in order to carry out permanent repairs in an acceptable way, our highways team took delivery of a piece of mobile equipment called a 'Multihog', earlier this year. The Multihog can be fitted with various attachments. We have purchased the winter packs and milling pack, which has been in use since January 2013, and has been very successful in dealing with small carriageway patches. It versatility will lend itself to carrying out permanent repairs to potholes. Our delivery team of 45 in-house staff have had training on-site to use this method and came up with ideas for refining patch size during trials.

A major benefit of using this permanent repair method is that we don't get repeat potholes in same location. Another is that the repair is more neatly shaped. The normal cost of each temporary pothole repair is £15, whereas this costs £35-40 per square meter for a permanent repair, making in more cost-effective in the long term. An additional plus is that the Multi-hog can have a plough fitted on the front or a gritter on the back to support winter maintenance work on small side roads such as those leading to primary schools.

We don't know any other councils who are doing permanent repairs in the same way and and have had a lot of interest from other authorities. We believe it is an effective way of carrying out permanent repairs as part of the council's overall safety defect reduction strategy.

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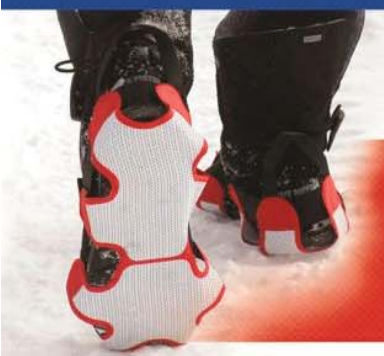

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Performance data helps you sail through choppy waters

The APSE performance networks seminar 2013 got off to a dramatic start with the strongest winds and tidal surges in sixty years battering the UK. As many areas struggled with coastal flooding delegates who managed to navigate the weather and transport problems, or who didn't have to return to their operational duties for emergency cover, were spared the worst of the weather but were soon deeply immersed in performance data.

This year's seminar, themed around the use of benchmarking in an age of open data and open public services, explored how data can be used to both inform service improvement and provide a means for local authorities to demonstrate accountability on service cost, quality and performance.

Opening the seminar Graham Smith, Deputy Commissioner and Director of Freedom of Information, explained the role of the Information Commissioners Office including being independent of Government and promoting openness by public bodies and data privacy for individuals. Mr Smith explained a series of developments which have led to proactive and reactive statutory developments as well as encouraging citizen participation in public life and decision making.

A specific growth area was highlighted by the deputy commissioner as being in the field of the re-use of public sector information. Key pieces of legislation include the use of the Freedom of Information Act as well as the new dataset provisions under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

During the question and answer session with the audience several delegates raised the prospect of 'data-dumping' rather than meaningful data. Concerns were also raised that the information flow could be used mischievously - not just for perhaps political purposes or 'point-scoring' but to undermine the principles of best value which remains a statutory duty on local authorities. Mr Smith responded that councils need to be mindful of appropriate and responsible data sharing and managing information risk. Records management retention and disposal are key elements of effective data management.

Juliet Whitworth, Research and Information Manager at the Local Government Association spoke about the need to use performance data as part of a sector led improvement programme.

Juliet explained that the development of a dashboard based approach to the new LG Inform platform was a

new improvement tool for local government. However it is dependent upon participation from local authorities and for those local authorities to act upon and use the data in a positive way. At the question and answer session Juliet confirmed that LG Inform was not a substitute for the frontline service data used by APSE performance networks members but it that the two systems are likely to be complementary.

Mark Bramah, APSE assistant chief executive, outlined how in the new era of open data the use of performance networks reports can help local authorities provide meaningful data sets on which to compare services with others. Mark also explained how the use of data continues to drive service improvement.

Highlighting the variables upon which to compare performance delegates were reminded that assessing performance can be compared to decisions that are made in a retail context; for example purchases driven by low cost or driven by style over value for money. In the same way within public services distinctions need to be drawn with the service quality, level and often volume provided.

The plenary sessions on day two of the seminar provided further scope for debate with John Flaherty of Knowsley Council posing the question as to whether councils know their data or are simply lost in a sea of numbers.

Mr Flaherty set out to explain that an audit of green space performance data had helped to shape and influence Knowsley's first Green Space Strategy. Knowsley have used the strategy to identify green space standards within the local area and qualitative performance information to shape local policies and actions. This has included a focus on tangible improvements and a new performance framework which can be utilised to measure the impact of Knowsley's green space assets on the delivery of a range of council strategic outcomes.

With a particular focus on health and well-being John identified the use of green space to meet other policy targets such as assistance to those in the local population with cardiac or lung diseases as well as tackling both adult and child obesity. Acknowledging some of the longer term outcomes may be difficult to measure it was nevertheless essential, he said, that councils grasp the use of their green space assets to maximise local benefits.

Mr Flaherty also explained how Knowsley had developed relationships with a range of partners to secure new funding streams in the face of local government cuts, enabling performance improvement and generating efficiencies in spite of the tight fiscal circumstances.

Andrew Stephens, Executive Director of the Data Unit Wales, explained the role of the Data Unit in the context of Wales Devolved national government hosting twenty two unitary local authorities, all which vary significantly in terms of performance and the Wales Performance Improvement Framework.

'Safe' environment (including regulators?)

Mr Stephens explained that a core role of the unit is to provide a safe environment for the exchange of data, including data used by regulators, and to provide a basis to review data and performance. A core function of the Data Unit Wales was, he explained, to facilitate reviews of performance and assist in benchmarking data. Andrew emphasised that to do this effectively it was necessary to examine 'real' differences in service performance and to then agree actions for service improvement.

Around the workshops

The need for on-going reviews of what data is telling us was a continuing theme of the seminar. The working seminar incorporates facilitated workshops across twelve different service areas with each working group deciding on:-

- A discussion on performance reports and data and sector based trends
- Whether the data collected is sufficient to inform any emerging policy trends or service pressures or whether new data should be collected
- Any pressing issues within the sector for APSE to take to future working group meeting to develop and inform performance networks

The workshops incorporated presentations from best and most improved performers from the specific sectors as well as guest speakers. For details about your sector reports contact the performance networks team or use the contact forms on the new APSE website.

Contact: mbaines@apse.org.uk

Performance networks awards 2013

Building cleaning
Best performer

Chesterfield Borough Council, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, Inverclyde Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Midlothian Council, Staffordshire County Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council

Winner: Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Building cleaning
Most improved performer

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, East Dunbartonshire Council, Fife Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, Inverclyde Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Midlothian Council, North Lanarkshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, West Lothian Council

Winner: Inverclyde Council

Building maintenance
Best performer

A1 Housing - Bassetlaw District Council, Clackmannanshire Council, Falkirk Council, Oxford City Council, Swansea City and County, Waveney District Council, West Dunbartonshire Council

Winner: Falkirk Council

Building maintenance
Most improved performer

Clackmannanshire Council, Falkirk Council, Kirklees Council, North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council, Nottingham City Homes, Nottingham City Council, Waveney District Council

Winner: Nottingham City Homes

Cemetary and crematorium services
Best performer

Conwy County Borough Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Ipswich Borough Council, Oxford City Council, Stafford Borough Council, Tendring District Council, Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust Ltd, Wyre Borough Council

Winner: Wigan Leisure & Culture Trust

Civic, cultural and community venues Best performer

The Spa Bridlington - East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Westdale Lane Community Centre - Gedling Borough Council, Upton Community Centre - Halton Borough Council, The Platform - Lancaster City Council, Cwmavon Community Centre - Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Sandfields Community Education Centre - Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Radley Common Community Centre - Warrington Borough Council

Winner: Cwmavon Community Centre, Neath Port Talbot CBC

Civic, cultural and community venues Most improved performer

The Spa Bridlington - East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Killisick Community Centre - Gedling Borough Council, Castlefields Community Centre - Halton Borough Council, Bryn Village Hall - Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Sandfields Community Education Centre - Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Sandy Lane Centre - Warrington Borough Council

Winner: Castlefields Community Centre, Halton Borough Council

Education catering Best performer

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Clackmannanshire Council, Denbighshire County Council East Renfrewshire Council, Hartlepool Borough Council, Manchester City Council

Winner: Denbighshire County Council

Education catering Most improved performer

Cheshire West and Chester Council, Denbighshire County Council, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, Fife Council, Inverclyde Council, Manchester City Council

Winner: Fife Council

Parks, open spaces and horticultural services Best performer

Conwy County Borough Council, Denbighshire County Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fife Council, Halton Borough Council, Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough Council, West Dunbartonshire Council, Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust Ltd

Winner: Conwy County Borough Council

Parks, open spaces and horticultural services Most improved performer

Aberdeen City Council, Conwy County Borough Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Gedling Borough Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Oxford City Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, West Dunbartonshire Council

Winner: Aberdeen City Council

Refuse collection
Best performer

East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Hull City Council, Kettering Borough Council, Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough Council, North East Derbyshire District Council, Oxford City Council, West Lindsey District Council, Wolverhampton City Council

Winner: West Lindsey District Council

Refuse collection
Most improved performer

Bolsover District Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, London Borough of Enfield, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, North East Derbyshire District Council, Oxford City Council, Wolverhampton City Council

Winner: Oxford City Council

Roads/highways and winter maintenance Best performer

Dundee City Council, East Renfrewshire Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, Midlothian Council, Moray Council, North Ayrshire Council, Southampton City Council, Western Isles Council

Winner: Moray Council

Roads/highways and winter maintenance Most improved performer

Bridgend County Borough Council, Clackmannanshire Council, East Ayrshire Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Moray Council, Pembrokeshire County Council

Winner: East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Sports and leisure facility management
Best performer

Lammas Leisure Centre - Ashfield District Council, Copeland Pool - North Country Leisure, Copeland Borough Council, Beverley Leisure Centre - East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Lifestyles Millennium House - Liverpool City Council, Wentworth Leisure Centre -North Country Leisure, Northumberland County Council, Torridge Pool - 1610 Limited

Winner: Beverley Leisure Centre, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Sports and leisure facility management
Most improved performer

Selston Leisure Centre - Ashfield District Council, Copeland Pool - North Country Leisure, Copeland Borough Council, Goole Leisure Centre - East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Canolfan Hamdden Dwyfor - Gwynedd Council, Lifestyles Millennium House - Liverpool City Council, Fullwell Cross Leisure Centre - London Borough of Redbridge, Willowburn Sports and Leisure Centre - North Country Leisure, Northumberland County Council, Monkton Stadium -South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council

Winner: Willowburn Sports & Leisure Centre, Northumberland County Council

Street cleansing
Best performer

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, East Renfrewshire Council, Gedling Borough Council, North East Derbyshire District Council, North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council, Oxford City Council, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

Winner: Eastleigh Borough Council

Street cleansing
Most improved performer

Eastleigh Borough Council, Gedling Borough Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, North East Derbyshire District Council, Stirling Council, West Dunbartonshire Council, Wolverhampton City Council

Winner: Gedling Borough Council

Street lighting
Best performer

Ceredigion County Council, Denbighshire County Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, East Lothian Council, Highland Council, Isle of Anglesey County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

Winner: Denbighshire County Council

Street lighting
Most improved performer

Caerphilly County Borough Council, Dundee City Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Vale of Glamorgan County Borough Council

Winner: Neath Port Talbot County BC

Transport and vehicle maintenance
Best performer

Durham County Council, East Dunbartonshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, North Ayrshire Council, North East Lincolnshire Distric t Council, Oxford City Council, Sheffield City Council, Wakefield M etropolitan District Council

Winner: East Renfrewshire Council

Transport and vehicle maintenance
Most improved performer

Midlothian Council, North East Lincolnshire District Council, Renfrewshire Council, Sheffield City Council, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council

Winner: Wakefield Metropolitan District Council

School food is firmly on the menu

Rob Bailey, APSE's principal advisor on catering, reflects on the increased national focus on school meals and a growing sense of optimism among education caterers.

School meals are getting more attention than ever. Politicians have recognised the benefits of school lunches and education caterers are pulling out the stops to compete with unhealthy packed lunches, chip shops and the lure of high street café chains.

APSE's interest in school meals dates back twenty years and our role co-ordinating the Secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food is keeping us at the centre of debates on this important issue. The Group, chaired by Sharon Hodgson MP, shadow minister for women and equalities, brings together interested parties from across the UK to shape policy – including the authors of School Food Plan, Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent, and commercial partners as well as politicians.

Education catering has received an increasing amount of attention over the past decade. The campaign by television chef Jamie Oliver in 2005 and subsequent Nutritional Standards did a good job in raising awareness of the need for healthy school meals. And when the Department for Education asked the founders of the Leon restaurant chain to review school food last year, this was timely. The resulting School Food Plan, published in July, has spelled largely good news for education caterers. The Plan puts catering skills on the curriculum so children leave school able to cook nutritious meals. Dining facilities are now part of Ofsted inspections and there will be more training for the nation's 58,000 school catering staff, among other measures.

The final recommendation in the Plan made the headlines as it prompted a governmental commitment to free lunches for all children at infants' schools. APSE is among those organisations that welcomed this announcement. But, with the move expected to cost £600m a year, a the question mark hangs over the way in which funding will be allocated. There is no detail on where funding for meals in England is coming from and money for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has not been ring-fenced, as responsibility for education budgets is devolved. It also remains to be seen how the matter of financing what will inevitably be less than 100% uptake will be resolved. With the Plan aiming for 70% uptake, economies of scale may enable larger schools to cope with free meals at this level, but those with smaller volume may struggle. The recent Autumn statement clarified the level, but unfortunately not the mechanism for funding.

The School Food Plan's aim to increase the number of children eating healthy meals makes sense for the public purse when a quarter of children currently leave school obese and the NHS spent £10bn in 2012 treating illnesses caused by bad diet. Learning to eat well at school can encourage healthy eating habits for the rest of people's lives and studies suggest it aids educational attainment and behaviour.

Yet increasing uptake also presents a challenge as it is currently only around 40%. Younger children tend to eat packed lunches and research shows that two thirds of secondary school pupils and spend money on food outside of school at lunchtime. Education caterers are already upping their game because of competition

from private firms, the introduction of Academies and devolution of funding to schools. This means they are becoming imaginative in trying to beat the traditional image of school meals and encourage older pupils to stay on school grounds at lunch time, for example with 'food pods', covered seating areas in playgrounds and pre-ordered sandwiches. On-line payment systems can also make school meals more attractive to parents and taking orders in the mornings helps reduce waste, making the service more cost-effective.

As well as making meals more nutritious, making the school dining experience more attractive and joining up school food with the curriculum, caterers in many local authorities are also aiming to use locally sourced ingredients where possible in order to support the local economy and reduce carbon emissions.

All of this indicates that we are entering a much more positive era for school food and APSE's latest survey also reflects growing optimism among education caterers.

APSE's Sate of the Market Survey 2013 on Local Authority Catering Services

Our latest State of the Market survey received 135 responses, the majority of which were about education catering as this represents the largest sector in local authority catering. As the same questions have been asked every year since 2008, we are able to identify trends in responses.

The survey showed an increased focus on efficiency and productivity. It also showed a growing view that in-house caterers can hold their own in a competitive market and that devolved budgets and the creation of Academies does not necessarily lead to loss of business. Optimism that school meal numbers will continue to rise was reflected in a positive attitude in the ability of in-house caterers to innovate and market their offer.

Although the survey took place against a background of pressure on local authority budgets, a level of certainty seems to be returning. A total of 38% of respondents expected a decrease in budget over the next year, which is down from 50% in 2012 and 59% in 2011.

Almost 83% of catering managers anticipated an increase in their personal workload over the next 12 months, which is slightly higher than in 2012. Almost 62% anticipated an increase in the workload of the catering section as a whole compared with 54% in APSE's State of the Market Survey 2012.

The survey found the price of meals ranges from £1.15 to £2.30. The overall average remains at £1.92 with the most frequently quoted sale price for a school meal currently £1.95, which is up 5p on last year. The horse meat scandal appears to have had limited effect on meal uptake, with 88% of respondents saying it had not affected them adversely.

Free school meals were being piloted in some authorities during our 2008 survey and 74% of caterers were supportive of such a move being rolled out nationally. Support for free school meals for all remained high at 69% in our 2013 survey. The survey was conducted prior to Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg's announcement on free lunches at infants' schools, so it will be interesting to see the impact of this announcement in our next survey.

Contact: Rob Bailey on rbailey@apse.org.uk

APSE catering, cleaning and facilities management seminar 2014

A major two-day seminar at the Crowne Plaza, Chester

Wednesday 29 and Thursday 30 January 2014

apse seminars

Multi skilling the workforce

Neath Port Talbot Homes explains their approach to delivering a multi-skilled workforce and complying with the Welsh Housing Quality Standard

Social housing is an ever growing sector. With the introduction of WHQS (Welsh Housing Quality Standard) by Welsh Government and stock transfers there has been a significant increase in the number of organisations that are now responsible for providing homes to those in housing need.

Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd (CCG) was set up in April 2010 with the transfer of 6,300 homes from the Council. The need to deliver WHQS improvements was the driver of change in Gwynedd like many in other areas of Wales which have seen stock transfer from local authority to independent association.

The move ensured CCG could invest £136 million in homes over a period of 5 years, and £446 million over 30 years.

As with many other Large Scale Voluntary Transfers (LSVTs) setting up CCG has not only meant better homes for tenants but has also brought with it a real boost to the local economy through business, employment and training opportunities.

The scale of the investment in Gwynedd has meant that contractors have been brought in to complete a proportion of the work. However, in an ever more competitive market organisations like CCG are forced to look more creatively at how they can deliver investment work and planned maintenance programmes.

Traditionally at local authorities and at many housing associations specialist single trades have been directly employed to carry out repairs and maintenance as well as work to upgrade homes. On WHQS and future planned maintenance programmes, this would not necessarily have been the most economical, efficient or practical solution. Multi-skilling staff has, therefore, been recognised as the way forward – providing value for money for housing organisations and opportunities for trades staff to up-skill.

NPT Homes, like CCG was set up in March 2011 following the transfer of Neath Port Talbot Council's housing stock to the newly formed Registered Social Landlord. The transfer has allowed NPT Homes to invest £220M in improving, repairing and maintaining the 9300 transferred properties to The Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

To ensure this happened and that the workforce had the necessary qualifications to meet the trend towards multiskilling the focus had to shift to training.

So CCG joined forces with NPT Homes to look for solutions and to ensure their current and potential workforce are adequately trained. Both organisations recognised that there was a need for an accredited qualification and apprenticeship scheme in multiskilling which would specifically reflect the needs and work of housing associations.

The situation was that CCG and NPT Homes had core apprenticeships in the traditional trades such as joinery, plastering and plumbing and a NVQ Level 2 Diploma in Maintenance Operations which was suitable as a bolt on to existing core trades. However, this was not considered robust enough as a standalone qualification. A more specific multiskilling qualification was required which was specifically tailored to meet the needs of housing associations and that would also provide a standalone qualification up to level 3 for new entrants.

A joint request was submitted by CCG and NPT Homes to CITB (the national training organisation for construction), formerly Construction Skills, for a review of the current level 2 NVQ in Maintenance Operations and the creation of a higher level 3 NVQ. The request was included in CITB's 2012 National Occupational Standards (NOS) review programme.

A National Working Group (NWG) was set up in January 2012 with representation from the housing sector, trade unions and training providers to look at the proposals. In November 2012 proposed changes were presented to CITB and to potential employers and training providers.

The proposal was accepted and approved by regulators with the new qualifications now available on the NOS directory.

The NVQ Diploma in Maintenance Operations has been re-named 'Building Maintenance Multi-trade Repair and Refurbishment Operations' and CITB was tasked with writing the different routes to the new qualification both at level 2 and 3. This work was completed in April 2013.

Both the Level 2 and 3 qualifications are now available to awarding bodies such as CSkills Awards, City & Guilds. The hope is that they can also be developed into apprenticeship frameworks and offered to local training providers and further education colleges and eventually to employers.

Both CCG and NPT Homes have already done some work to raise awareness for these new opportunities by talking to awarding organisations most relevant to the construction industry in Wales. However, much work still needs to be done to ensure take up of the new qualification by employers and employees alike.

This has been a unique project as it has been steered by two housing associations rather than the awarding bodies and training providers. The need was recognised by CCG and NPT Homes and by working in partnership with each other they have found a solution which will benefit the housing sector and importantly those who are looking to improve their skills and increase their employment prospects within the sector.

Looking to the future effort will now be placed on ensuring that awarding bodies can develop an apprenticeship framework for the level 2 and 3 by working with employers and training providers to promote and raise awareness for the new qualification.

Contact: Llŷr ap Gruffydd (Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd) on 0300 123 8084 or Gareth John (NPT Homes) on 01639 505948

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Report back

A round up of APSE advocacy and events on behalf of our members

Another busy few months for APSE as we report back on recent events and activity across the UK

England

Carry on performing

APSE performance networks and awards were once again hosted in Blackpool. The Worshipful the Mayor of Blackpool, Councillor Eddie Collett and Mayoress Mrs Heather Collett attended the awards dinner welcoming delegates to the performance networks awards dinner.

Serving up care not cuts

APSE national Chair, Cllr Leon Unczur and chief executive Paul O'Brien attended the launch of national community meals week today at Central Hall, Westminster in November as the issue of welfare catering and cuts once again comes under the spotlight.

The Beautiful South

The APSE South and South West region held a series of autumn advisory group in London on Catering, Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing, and Transport Services and Vehicle Maintenance. The Autumn season culminated with an APSE stand exhibiting at the London Councils Summit at the end of November.

Wales

Yes says the Minister

The Welsh Minister for Local Government and Government Business, Lesley Griffiths AM, met with APSE assistant chief executive Mark Bramah in November. The Minister has agreed to address the APSE Wales seminar for 2014 and an on-going dialogue with APSE on the Wales programme for improvement will continue. For details about Wales event s contact Debbie Johns on djohns@apse.org.uk

Scotland

Soft FM

APSE Scotland recently hosted it's annual Soft FM seminar at the Westerwood hotel which was attended by local authorities throughout Scotland

Building a sustainable future

The Scottish Building, Housing and Renewables & Energy Efficiency conference will take place at the Peebles Hydro on 19th and 20th February 2014. For details contact Louise McMillan on lmcmillan@apse.org.uk

Rising stars take note

The Scottish Fleet, Waste & Grounds conference which will be taking place in Aviemore on 6-9 May 2014 and will once again include the Rising Star awards sponsored by Zero Waste Scotland. The awards recognise up and coming public sector managers. For details contact Laura McNab on lmcnab@apse.org.uk

Northern Ireland

60 plus

Local Government Northern Ireland have received 60 submissions for the awards. Finalists will be announced in January with the winners announced at the NILGA conference which will be held of the 27 February at La Mon Hotel, Castlereagh.

Planning for wind

A seminar will take place on the 12 December at Omagh, to discuss the impact for local authorities of the transfer of planning responsibilities from the department of the environment to local councils. The seminar will also consider practical and policy issue for wind farm developments.

Meetings around NI

APSE chief executive Paul O'Brien will meet Ian Maye, the deputy secretary for planning policy and local government on Thursday 12 December to take forward discussions on local government reorganisation in Northern Ireland. APSE will also meet with Mark Durkan, Minister of the Environment on Friday 13 December.

Paul O'Brien continues to chair the local government reform joint forum.

The Improvement Road Scotland

APSE Principal Advisor for Scotland Louise McMillan alongside chief executive Paul O'Brien will meet Cosla and the Scottish Improvement Service on 18 December to discuss APSE's recent research on the 2020 Council. They will also meet the Secretariat of the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy. Louise will also meet with the SOCOEHS on 13 December to provide an update on the APSE performance networks protective Services pilot

The Autumn Statement: Round up

The Chancellors Autumn statement contained some key points for local government:

• Local government will not be subject to more cuts from the overall £1bn announced councils will be expected to freeze council tax again next year.

• There will be an overall cap on welfare spending. The Chancellor stated that that only 50% of UK spending is subject to fixed budget controls. Whilst basic state pensions would not be included in the cap if welfare spend goes over the cap there will be a vote in the House of Commons.

• An additional £300m of borrowing capacity was announced so councils can build more homes providing some headroom in budgets for local councils and social housing tenants who want to move for job purposes will be helped with the 'right to move'.

• The Chancellor also made it clear that Councils should sell off the most expensive social housing but to use the money to build more homes.

• The small business rate relief scheme will be extended for one year from April 2014.

• Business rates will be capped at 2% from April 2014

• Retail businesses in England in premises with a rateable value of up to £50,000 will get a business rates discount worth £1,000.

Above: Cllr Leon Unczur at the launch of the National Community Meals Week, held at Central Hall, Westminster.

Above: Cllr Leon Unczur with his workshipful the Mayor of Blackpool, at the Performance Networks awards , held in Blackpool

The National Audit Office explores the national road network asset

The National Audit Office (NAO) is currently undertaking a study examining maintenance of strategic infrastructure. The main focus of the study is on England's most valuable asset, the national road network. The NAO is looking at the funding arrangements and the asset maintenance practices in place to keep existing road infrastructure in a safe and serviceable condition.

An important element of the NAO's study is obtaining information and perspectives from local government. The NAO is carrying out a short survey of local highways directors to improve its understanding of:

• the approach of local highway authorities to maintaining existing road infrastructure in a serviceable condition in the face of spending pressures; and

• the level of support local highway authorities receive from the Department for Transport.

A link to the survey can be found on the APSE website. Go to the APSE home page and click on research then click on 'take part in the latest research and surveys'.

The NAO also welcomes the views of other individuals involved in maintenance of strategic infrastructure. If you would like to

contribute, please complete the NAO's other short survey and again a link can be found on the research pages of the APSE website.

The NAO is independent of government and scrutinises public spending on behalf of Parliament. The NAO publishes around 60 value-for-money reports each year looking across the range of government's activities. Reports are presented to Parliament, and most are considered by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts.

Is big always beautiful?

In economic terms there is a general acceptance that 'big is beautiful' helping to spread the cost of production and generate efficient ways of working but is this concept true in local government services asks Andy Mudd of APSE solutions?

The economic concept of economy of scale dates right back to 18th century economist Adam Smith. The idea is simple; the bigger a firm is the more it is able to spread the costs of production to reduce its cost per unit of output. It is this principle that underpins the oft repeated but rarely challenged view that the best way for local government to bring its costs down is to have shared services. There are various ways in which this can be achieved, including reorganisation, joint service arrangements, public/public joint ventures and contracting out to one of the big private providers but in all cases it is the ability to spread management and other costs that is expected to lead to savings.

In fact, thinking has moved on since Adam Smith's time and it is now well recognised that scale can bring so called diseconomies as well as economies. An example is the loss of control that can accompany increased size and complexity. Some economists have also observed that scale economies are less likely to arise in labour intensive industries and cast doubt on the applicability of the concept to public sector service delivery. The loss of morale in the workforce that can accompany consolidation of local government has been identified as particularly significant source of decreased productivity, such as the 2005 study by the Indiana Policy Review Foundation, 'The effects of City-County consolidation'. Unfortunately, this side of the argument does not seem to have made much impression in so far as the push for ever greater scale in public service delivery is concerned. But what does the evidence tell us – is big really beautiful as classical economics suggests or should we take heed of EF Schmacher's arguments in favour of keeping things local?

APSE Solutions has been looking at data from the APSE Performance Networks benchmarking service to try and work out whether the bigger authorities do indeed have lower unit costs. The services looked at are refuse collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance. The starting hypothesis was that if scale reduces unit cost there will be a strong negative correlation between the number of households covered by a council and the cost of service per household. The correlation would be negative because as one variable (size) goes up the other (unit cost) should go down.

The statistical test for correlation between two sets of data results in a score between -1.0 and +1.0. A strong negative correlation would produce a result close to -1.0. In this case, across the 50 or so authorities for which data is held, the correlation between number of households and cost of service per household turned out to be both weak and positive. In other words, whilst there is only a tenuous relationship between size and cost, it goes in the opposite direction to what might be expected – unit cost goes up as size increases.

It is often suggested that the unit cost of environmental services is heavily influenced by both geography and density of population. A large geographic area with a low population will have higher unit costs than an urban area with the same population. In order to test this we calculated the correlation between population density, defined as hectorage/population, with cost per household. For

refuse collection, this did indeed produce a negative, if weak, result of -0.12. The results for street cleansing and parks were both weakly positive, indicating that population density is not a strong factor in cost for these services.

In recognition of the relationship between population density and cost, the refuse collection sample was then split into groups corresponding to population density and the correlation between number of households and cost per household, retested. For refuse collection, the results indicate a weak negative correlation between the two sets of data for the lowest density authorities of -0.14. For every other density group the correlation was weakly positive. Interestingly the strength of correlation seems to increase with increasing density of population. Thus it appears that increasing scale may bring a benefit for low population density authorities but can result in higher cost for those with medium to high population density.

The analysis does not mean that sharing services will never lead to cost savings but it does indicate that this should never be treated as a given. There are clearly variables other than size and population density impacting on unit costs. Modern economists tell us for example, that diseconomies of scale can arise from the loss of control over processes that accompanies increasing size. A single manager may be able to manage 20 refuse collection crews but this does not mean that they will operate as efficiently as they would if the manager only had to manage 10. At a more strategic level, a single Chief Executive can run a unitary authority with its vast range of services but it is unlikely, when they have to worry about safeguarding children for example, that they will be as focussed on refuse collection, as the Chief Executive of a District Council would be.

As it happens, the evidence does not provide support either way in the District v Unitary argument. In the lowest cost per household authorities there is an even number of both types of council represented. At the other end of the scale Districts and Unitaries are also both present in the top percentile of cost per household.

APSE has consistently argued that efficiency is a factor of how a service is provided rather than who it is provided by. This analysis provides support for this view and indicates that, other than for the lowest density authorities, the scale of the provider is also largely irrelevant.

As the table demonstrates we should not always assume that big is beautiful or indeed cheaper….

Contact: Andy Mudd, APSE Principal Consultant, APSE Solutions

APSE Solutions provides support to local authorities working on service reviews, income generation and commercial strategies, service improvement planning and transformation programmes and robust performance analysis to assist in service improvement planning

	Refuse collection	Street Cleansing	Parks
Number of households correlated with cost per household	0.05	0.34	0.27
Population density correlated with cost per household	-0.12	0.24	0.001
Pop density < 5 correlated with cost per household	-0.14		
Pop density 5-10 correlated with cost per household	0.32		
Pop density >10 correlated with cost per household	0.49		

Empty to Rental Ready:

Nottingham City Homes approach to new technology as an aid to efficiency

Nottingham City Homes is piloting some unique access control technology to help return the City's empties to 'rental-ready' more quickly. Working with cutting-edge British manufacturers Loxal Security, has allowed a re-evaluation of the void access process with the aim of improving productivity and efficiency.

In many ways, Nottingham City Homes is a model of operational efficiency benefiting from a close working relationship with the Housing client, significant investment in operational and back-office technology and a compact geographic area of service. The multi-skilled workforce is highly dedicated, experienced and enjoys the benefit of a proven supply-chain. However, NCH faces challenges of continuous service improvement, issues of housing demand and statutory changes such as the 'bedroom tax' and Council tax payments for voids. These make a significant impact upon costs and meeting KPI's.

NCH is responsible for the repairs, maintenance and major works to Nottingham's 29,000 council dwellings working on some 2,000 voids per annum. Returning these valuable housing assets to occupancy quickly and efficiently is a key objective. Maximising the utilisation of the housing stock can make a significant impact upon housing need and diminish the supply-side problems associated with homelessness, temporary accommodation and wider housing need.

Nicholas Eley, NCH Voids and Service Referrals Project Manager is keen to ensure that the organisation is at the top of its game regarding void turnaround. This requires a continuous review of all processes, procedures and technology which can improve efficiency and productivity. Nicholas says, 'NCH has enjoyed significant investment in nearly 300 new vehicles and is implementing PDA technology to improve service delivery. However, access to voids as a workplace for our operatives still relied on the use of door keys'.

With a view to providing easier access to voids, NCH has invested in universal lock barrels which are installed at the handover from housing. Operatives have universal keys enabling access to any void and the universal barrel is replaced with a new lock and three keys for the incoming tenant when the property is handed-back to housing in a lettable condition. This process requires the attendance to site of a locksmith-trained operative for each void. More critically, this process allows 'access' for operatives but no 'control' regarding who can access voids and when. Outgoing staff and contractors can retain keysets, they can be duplicated and passed between individuals.

To overcome these issues, NCH is piloting a new void access control technology from Loxal, a specialist British manufacturer of unique key management and security systems. Loxal has developed IDACS – Intelligent Digital Access Control System – which is common throughout its range of key safes, void security doors and void alarm systems. IDACS operates on unique PIN numbers, like cashpoint card numbers, which are allocated to all staff authorised to access a void. These unique six-digit numbers enable universal access to any void where Loxal equipment is installed for that client. However, unlike universal keys, users can be added and barred to ensure that access to each void is only by authorised personnel. More importantly, the technology provides a detailed audit trail of all activity at each void. This forensic detail provides useful management information regarding the void turnaround process and offers unparalleled insight into daily activity at each void.

The pilot is in its infancy with the first trial digital Letterbox keysafes being delivered in May and a further 45 units being delivered in batches over the subsequent months. These unique units are completely discrete being hidden within the front entrance door letterbox. All units are concentrated within the Central housing area so that outcomes can be more clearly evaluated and housing staff and operatives become familiar with the operation of the technology. Audit trails are now being downloaded and formatted by NCH allowing the value of this additional management information to be evaluated in comparison with existing information such as vehicle location reports and the output from operatives through time sheets and works orders. Some 100 authorised users are programmed into each keysafe with additional codes being available for short-term property use or 24-hour emergency one-off use.

Initial benefits were discovered through the remote issuing of an access code to an occupational therapist who required access to a void but did not have a universal key. Similarly, two operatives were found to have shared their codes and these users were quickly barred from further access to any Loxal void. Next steps include the trialling of wall mounted units for communal entrance door access fobs so that entry to voids within blocks remains 'keyless'.

Nicholas Eley says. 'Over the next few months, the business case for the Loxal technology is being evaluated and the benefits of digital access control measured against its cost. We are delighted to have been able to adopt this new technology quickly and seamlessly to enable its evaluation against our current processes and procedures'.

Although more costly than traditional universal barrels the added management control, forensic analysis of activity at each void and improved flexibility have reaped rewards with other landlords and repairs contractors. Elsewhere gains in productivity and efficiency have enabled voids to be returned to occupancy up to seven days faster. The resulting additional rent-week more than pays for the cost of the Loxal technology.

Loxal is seeking new landlords to evaluate this new technology and welcomes approaches from landlords and repairs contractors wishing to participate in pilot evaluation programmes.

Contact: pbrennan@apse.org.uk

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Events diary

Date	Event	Venue
10 January	Catering, cleaning FM Supervisory Skills	London
14 January	Customer Care in Cems & Crems	Glasgow
15 January	Catering, cleaning FM Supervisory Skills	Glasgow
16 January	Asset Management in Parks & Greenspaces	Edinburgh
17 January	Managing Allotments	Stafford
20 January	H&S in Amenity Services & Grounds Maintenance	London
22 January	Supervisory Skills for Team Leaders in Frontline Services in NI	Craigavon
22 January	Scottish FM advisory group	Glasgow
23 January	Project Management in Leisure Services	Craigavon
27 January	Principles of Contract Management	Manchester
28 January	CHAMP2 Business Change Management	Birmingham
29 &30 January	Facilities Management Seminar 2013	Chester
30 January	Event Management	Edinburgh
31 January	H&S for Managers in Waste & Enviro Services	Leeds
5 February	Finance Management	Manchester
5 February	Renewables and Climate Change advisory group	Manchester
05 February	Train the Trainer	London
06 February	Event Management	London
07 February	Asset Management in Parks & Greenspaces	London
11 February	Fleet Administration	Glasgow
12 February	Building maintenance advisory group	Manchester
12 February	Customer Care in Cems & Crems	London
13 February	Supervisory Skills for Team Leaders in Frontline Services	London
18,19,20 February	Scottish Housing and Building Seminar	Peebles
24 February	H&S in Amenity Services & Grounds Maintenance	Glasgow

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