improving value for money in local government

a compendium of good practice from Audit Commission reports
The Audit Commission promotes the best use of public money by ensuring the proper stewardship of public finances and by helping those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The Commission was established in 1983 to appoint and regulate the external auditors of local authorities in England and Wales. In 1990 its role was extended to include the NHS. Today its remit covers more than 13,000 bodies which between them spend nearly £100 billion of public money annually. The Commission operates independently and derives most of its income from the fees charged to audited bodies.

Auditors are appointed from District Audit and private accountancy firms to monitor public expenditure. Auditors were first appointed in the 1840s to inspect the accounts of authorities administering the Poor Law. Audits ensured that safeguards were in place against fraud and corruption and that local rates were being used for the purposes intended. These founding principles remain as relevant today as they were 150 years ago.

Public funds need to be used wisely as well as in accordance with the law, so today’s auditors have to assess expenditure not just for probity and regularity, but also for value for money. The Commission's value-for-money studies examine public services objectively, often from the users' perspective. Its findings and recommendations are communicated through a wide range of publications and events.

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Introduction

1. This compendium summarises previous value-for-money (VFM) reports, management handbooks and relevant management papers published by the Audit Commission on local government topics. It could be useful to members and officers carrying out best value reviews on these topics. Copies of the publications are still available. If you wish to order further copies of any of these, they are available from the Commission’s publications agents (see order form at the back of the compendium).

2. This publication updates the Audit Commission’s 1995 compendium. The new compendium contains references to new reports, management papers and management handbooks, as well as some publications from the old compendium, where they are still considered sufficiently relevant in the light of legislative and other contextual changes. Where there have been significant changes since the publication of reports – for example, the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) – entries in the compendium highlight how these affect their ongoing relevance, both in terms of their data and their messages.

3. A companion compendium of good practice from Audit Commission reports on the health service was published in 1999. This is of relevance to some local authority social services functions (although the most relevant reports are also covered in this local government volume).

How to use the compendium

4. The contents page lists each entry, with related topics grouped together. At a glance, you should be able to see if the service that concerns you is included. There is an index at the back which will also help you identify any entry covering the topics of interest to you.

The compendium is divided into two parts:

5. Section 1: Fundamentals covers the Commission’s publications on topics such as service and financial planning, asset management, pay, fraud and central support services.

6. Section 2: Improving services covers publications about the delivery of front-line services, grouped into the following sub-sections: Education; Social services; Housing and property management; Environment, planning and economic development; Libraries, arts and museums; Home Office and other services.

At a glance, you should be able to see if the service that concerns you is included.

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Future work in local government

7. External auditors appointed by the Commission have new responsibilities to audit local authorities' best value performance plans (BVPPs), while the Commission will have a new role in carrying out best value inspections via the Best Value Inspectorate (incorporating the Housing Inspectorate). The booklet, *Best Value and the Audit Commission: Questions and Answers*¹, published in August 1999, gives officers and members broad answers to commonly asked questions about the Commission’s roles in best value audit and inspection.

8. *Best Assured*² (1999) explains the Commission’s role in the audit of BVPPs and how the audit of BVPPs relates to the Commission’s new powers to carry out best value inspections of those services which are not already covered by an existing inspectorate, including local authority housing, environmental services, libraries and refuse collection.


10. The Commission recognises that its previous work will need to alter significantly in the light of the best value regime in local government. During May and June 2000, Commission staff visited a cross-section of local authorities to hear their views on how to avoid duplication and how to get the best out of inspection, audit and studies. Examples of questions asked included: Should there be any local value-for-money audits at all? How should national studies change? Should good practice guides be published based on lessons from best value reviews and inspections?

11. During May 2000 the Commission also consulted local authorities and other interested bodies on whether the Commission should continue its own Audit Commission Performance Indicators (ACPIs), given that the Government now specifies Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) that local authorities must publish.

12. The results of these two consultation exercises have been analysed and the Commission will be making and announcing its decisions in the summer of 2000.

¹ These free publications are available from the Communications Department on 020 7396 1494
Fundamentals

The Audit Commission is responsible for the appointment of external auditors for local authorities in England and Wales. In exercising this function, the Audit Commission Act 1998 requires auditors to satisfy themselves that the audited body has ‘made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources’. The revised Code of Audit Practice defines the scope and form of local audits, including auditors’ responsibilities in relation to the audit of best value performance plans and for reviewing authorities’ use of resources.

The Commission also conducts value-for-money studies in specific areas of local government management and publishes occasional management papers that provide practical guidance on public management issues. The best value regime puts pressure on local government to demonstrate continuous improvement in all its services and functions within a robust management control framework. Although compulsory competitive tendering has been abolished, the Commission’s reports on the ‘client role’ in relation to contracted services (internal and external) for different functions and services are still highly relevant to authorities in meeting the rigours of best value.

This section of the compendium gathers together all the Commission’s publications that are relevant to the overall management of local government’s functions and services. For ease of access it is divided into four sub-sections: Business processes; Assets; Money and People.
Business processes

Service and financial planning

Refer to:

A Learning Experience
Service Delivery Planning in Local Government
Occasional Paper, 1997, 1862400288, £10, English only
1862400334, £10, Welsh/English bilingual

Planning to Succeed
Service and Financial Planning in Local Government
Management Paper, 1999, 1862401683, £15

A Measure of Success
Setting and Monitoring Local Performance Targets
Management Paper, 1999, 1862401462, £15

See also:

Regular as Clockwork
Raising the Standard of Local Government Financial Accounting
Management Paper, 1993, 0118861190, £6

Capital Gains
Improving the Local Government Capital Expenditure System
National Report, 1997, 1862400318, £20

Better by Far
Preparing for Best Value
Management Paper, 1998, 1862401292, £15

Worth More than Money
The Role of the Local Government Finance Director
Management Paper, 1998, 1862401292, £15

Getting the Groundwork Right
Financial Health of Local Authority Trading Units
Management Paper, 2000, 1862402043, £15

Background

From April 1st 2000, all local authorities in England and Wales are required to produce local performance plans. The plans should set out their vision for the local community, alongside their five-year programme of best value reviews to make the vision a reality. Regular monitoring and review of progress against both local targets and national best value indicators will be a key way for authorities to assess their progress in improving their services, as well as allowing local people to draw their own conclusions about their council’s performance.

A robust planning framework, supported by improvement targets, will be a key lever for ensuring the delivery of best value to the local community. The Commission has published a number of products that will assist local authorities in rising to this challenging task.

A Learning Experience drew on the experience of new authorities set up by the recent local government reorganisation. These authorities, in both England and Wales, needed to draw up new service and financial plans reflecting their new responsibilities. The report set out some of the key benefits of effective service delivery planning, including:

- an enhanced capacity to balance competing service demands and deliver key council priorities;
- tightening the links between local authority service planning, financial planning and performance management systems; and
- reflecting the views of users and the wider community in service provision.

Planning to Succeed included examples of good practice in the integration of service and financial planning in the short, medium and long term. The report identified specific issues that were especially relevant to councils’ preparations for best value.

A Measure of Success outlined a number of the issues that councils should consider when setting targets. A good target should relate to a service or corporate objective, be achievable but stretching, have the commitment of authority members and staff, and be easily understood.

Targets can be used to measure a number of different aspects of a service, including its inputs, outputs and outcomes. Councils should consider the audience for a particular target, before deciding which aspects of a service to focus on. Local people are likely to be interested in outcomes as service users, or inputs as taxpayers, but service managers may also need output data, to enable them to track efficiency in service delivery.
Councils also need to strike a balance in the number of indicators that they set. Too many indicators can lead to a lack of focus on what really matters. Too few can lead to staff focusing on a narrow range of services that do not reflect the range of activities that councils are engaged in. Above all, local people and staff should be involved in the design of indicators, to ensure that staff are committed to using them as a means to lever up performance, and that targets are tightly focused on the issues that really matter to local people.

**Key findings**

- A minority of councils had medium-term financial strategies in place.
- Less than one-half of staff felt that there was a clear sense of the overall corporate priorities throughout their authority.
- Few authorities had a comprehensive set of local performance targets in place.
- In some service areas where councils did set standards of service, only one-half measured whether or not they were achieving them.
- A minority of authorities consulted the public before setting targets.
- Authorities have addressed all these areas in the first year of Best Value Performance Plans (BVPPs), but further work is needed.

**Key recommendations**

All councils should:

- carry out a strategic review, to establish a clear set of corporate priorities for their five-year programme of best value reviews. This should involve staff and the public, to ensure ownership;
- introduce a single policy and resource allocation cycle, that clearly links policy decisions, service review, and the budget process;
- develop medium-term financial plans, looking forward at least three years, to ensure that there is a balance between service priorities and available resources and that the best value review cycle is appropriately resourced;
- decide on a concise range of local targets, in consultation with the local community, that facilitate regular performance review against key service priorities; and
- ensure that the annual BVPP reflects accurately the more detailed service and financial plans for the authority.
The client role and trading units

Refer to:
- Realising the Benefits of Competition
  The Client Role for Contracted Services
  National Report, 1993, 0118860984, £8.50
- Behind Closed Doors
  The Revolution in Central Support Services
  National Report, 1994, 0118861050, £5
- Making Markets
  A Review of the Audits of the Client Role for Contracted Services
  Update, 1995, 0118861476, £6
- Opening the Doors
  A Review of the Audits of Central Support Services
  Bulletin, 1995, 0118864238, £5
- A Fruitful Partnership
  Effective Partnership Working
- Promising Beginnings
  A Compendium of Initiatives to Improve Joint Working in Local Government
  Wirobound compendium, 1998, 1862401187, £25
- Taking the Initiative
  A Framework for Purchasing Under the Private Finance Initiative
  Management Paper, 1998, 1862401195, £15
- Getting the Groundwork Right
  Financial Health of Local Authority Trading Units
  Management Paper, 2000, 1862402043, £15

See also:
- Management Buy-outs
  Public Interest or Private Gain?
  Management Paper, 1990, 0117014567, £3.50

Background
The best value legislation (Local Government Act 1999) has replaced the previous CCT requirements placed on local authorities. However, the Government has made it clear in the best value guidance that the role of competition needs to be considered as a means of reviewing the efficiency and effectiveness of services: ‘fair and open competition will, in the Government’s view, most often be the best way of demonstrating that a function is being carried out effectively. Such competition is expected to play an essential and enduring role in ensuring best value, and reviews will need to consider how this can best be achieved’. Options that will be examined under the challenge agenda will include outcomes such as:

- externalisation of service delivery;
- private-public partnerships (whether under PFI or other arrangements); and
- transfer to another provider.

The Commission has published a number of reports and papers that are relevant to councils preparing for best value. These cover:

- client role for contracted services;
- client role for central support services;
- purchasing under the Private Finance Initiative;
- partnership working; and
- financial health of local authority trading units.

Client role for contracted services
Much of the good practice cited in the Commission’s study of the client role for contracted services is still very relevant to the requirements of the best value framework. Under best value, corporate arrangements for tendering must be fair and transparent, consistent with the best value principles of accountability to the public.

Realising the Benefits of Competition, while recognising the limitations of the CCT regime, emphasised the importance of the client role, which should be to facilitate the delivery of quality services to customers, irrespective of who is the service provider. This role will be equally important, if not more so, under best value. Even without a formal ‘client-contractor’ split, arrangements must be in place to ensure that the needs of service users are properly represented. The study also showed that the costs of the client side varied. While this could be explained to some extent by the different levels of expertise needed, it was also the result of other problems. There was, for instance, a widespread misapprehension that the client-side role was little more than specifying and monitoring service delivery. Local authorities must give further attention to these issues in the course of best value reviews.
Client role for central support services
Support services such as IT, legal, personnel and financial services have tended to concentrate more on their corporate function. They have not always provided the level of support needed by those charged with delivering frontline services.

White-collar CCT required authorities to define and create a client role charged with specifying, letting and managing contracts for support services on behalf of frontline users. The Audit Commission’s study was originally undertaken to help both service providers and users prepare for competition, by establishing a more formal basis for their existing relationship. Under the best value framework, they should be aiming to enhance this relationship by establishing a shared understanding of each other’s needs through agreed and explicit corporate, professional and operational standards.

*Behind Closed Doors* explained how this can, in part, be achieved by the introduction of Service Level Agreements (SLAs), under which the extent of support services and their costs are agreed between users and providers, alongside arrangements for monitoring performance and ensuring the quality of service delivery. Agreements that are sensibly drawn up and properly costed, while avoiding a bureaucratic ‘paper chase’, can help to provide the continuous improvements in frontline service delivery required by best value.

Purchasing under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI)
A PFI contract is a long-term commitment that could potentially restrict flexibility to adjust service delivery to new circumstances. The Commission’s management paper *Taking the Initiative* covers:

- Main features of PFI
- Planning PFI procurement
- Working with the private sector
- A framework for PFI procurement
- Conclusions for councillors and board members

*There was... a widespread misapprehension that the client side was little more than specifying and monitoring service delivery.*

Since the publication of *Taking the Initiative* the Construction Task Force has, in its report *Rethinking Construction*, also stressed the need for the public sector to be best practice clients that can work in closer, longer-term partnership with contractors while maintaining high standards of probity. This is the greatest challenge facing local authorities in seeking best value from capital investment from PFI.

Partnership working
The Audit Commission’s management paper *A Fruitful Partnership* aims to help members and senior officers in local government, the police and the NHS to make better decisions about when to set up a partnership, and to improve the effectiveness of existing and future partnerships. It follows the main stages in the life cycle of a partnership, outlining the likely problems at each stage and some ways of forestalling them.
The companion compendium *Promising Beginnings* highlights an extensive range of local government initiatives involving joint working. The compendium is intended primarily to raise awareness of these initiatives and to challenge all authorities to address this agenda.

A wide range of council services and functions are covered in the compendium, including:

- Libraries
- Council Tax
- Town centre development
- Planning
- Economic development and regeneration
- Community safety
- Social services
- Waste management
- Leisure
- Highways

**Financial health of local authority trading units**

The Commission’s management paper *Getting the Groundwork Right* gives detailed advice on how financial control can be maintained over local authority trading units in the context of best value. This paper is relevant to a wide audience, including trading unit managers, finance directors and members. The management paper covers business planning; in-year accounting and performance monitoring; the role of the finance director, monitoring officer and internal audit; and reporting principles. There is a set of key questions at the end of each chapter that are drawn together into a pull-out section for local authority officers and members to use when considering issues and identifying priorities.
Organisational restructuring

Refer to:
Form Follows Function
Changing Management Structures in the NHS and Local Government
Management Paper, 1996, 1862400008, £6.50

See also:
Paying the Piper...Calling the Tune
People, Pay and Performance in Local Government
Management Handbook, 1995, 0118861387, £30

Organisational restructuring

Background
Local government and the NHS are under constant pressure to reduce management costs while providing better services for users. This has led individual local authorities and health authorities and trusts to look critically at management structures and sometimes to ‘delayer’ – to remove one or more tiers of management. Delayering is sometimes viewed as a ‘quick fix’ to reduce costs, but this is an inappropriate way to approach it. Used correctly it can be a powerful tool. However, as with any restructuring, authorities should not reduce posts without first analysing, and, where necessary, changing work processes: ill-planned or excessive delayering can damage the capabilities of an organisation and result in the deterioration of service quality.

The Commission’s management paper Form Follows Function reviews the circumstances that may trigger a restructuring, looks at what is involved and at some of the implications. It is aimed at council and board members as well as top managers. The guiding principle should be that ‘form follows function’. This is true whatever the initial reason for restructuring. Current activities should be analysed against core objectives. Processes and structures should then be changed as necessary to allow objectives to be met in a more efficient and effective way.

Key findings
- Delayering should not be the starting point for change, but should follow as a result of wider initiatives. The guiding principle should be that ‘form follows function’.
- In the right circumstances, restructuring and losing management posts can deliver benefits, but not necessarily as many as expected.
- Examples of inefficient management structures can include:
  - long hierarchies, with managers having only one or two subordinates to manage, or individuals who mainly advise those above and check on those below;
  - inefficient information systems that create analysis or information jobs where a good computerised management information system could do the same;
  - pay systems that dictate a management structure; and
  - poor communications and/or slow decision-taking because information and requests for decisions have to pass through too many layers upwards to managers who are remote from operational activity.
- However, there are circumstances where it is unwise to reduce management posts. For example:
  - if it is not possible either to reduce existing workloads or to change the way the work is done, so that it can be carried out equally efficiently and effectively by less staff;
  - if the organisation is already performing poorly – unless the reason is due directly to having more managers than is necessary;
  - if removing managers creates a risk to service users; or
  - if the loss of a management post removes a key control (often financial) that cannot be replaced by a viable alternative.
Successful restructuring requires good leadership. Leaders must provide a clear, realisable vision of the future and communicate that to staff, so that they can be positively involved and see the change as an opportunity, and not just a threat.

Gaining the support of staff is important to the success of major change. It is important to get staff to understand that there is a problem before coming up with a solution. Serious attention should also be paid to communication with all staff, and people should be treated fairly in the selection for retained and new jobs, as well as any redundancies.

Reducing management posts means that other staff must be equipped to take on increased responsibility and work in a new structure. New roles and accountabilities must be set out clearly. The amount of training and support needed should not be underestimated – for managers as well as those being managed. Management information systems will often need redesigning to match the new responsibilities of staff.

Organisations should measure the success, or otherwise, of the new structure. A baseline should be agreed before restructuring takes place so that change can be measured; and the impact on service users should be a key indicator.

**Gaining the support of staff is important to the success of major change.**

**Key questions**
The paper contains questions for members, non-executive directors and top managers who are reviewing management structures and intending to reduce posts. These are laid out as checklists. They are intended to stimulate discussion, help identify the issues that are a priority and decide who should take the lead in addressing them.

Unexpected issues are likely to surface after a restructuring that reduces management posts. The quality of work has sometimes declined; essential controls have been lost; and gaps in skills and experience for top management posts have emerged. Careful monitoring and a willingness to make additional changes as a consequence of restructuring are important.
Working in partnership

Partnership working has also received greater attention following the recent local government reorganisation in England and Wales, where a number of new unitary authorities were created. In particular, where relatively small, multi-purpose authorities took on services such as education, social services and trading standards, there was an increased need for joint working with neighbours or with the ‘reduced’ counties.

Recent proposals giving local authorities the power to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their communities will enable local authorities to respond more innovatively through wider powers to form partnerships and the ability to develop comprehensive community strategies. The proposal would give powers to remove existing legislation which obstructs local authorities’ use of this new power, including statutory requirements to produce plans and strategies where these stand in the way of more effective approaches to meet local needs.

Partnership working is, potentially, a powerful tool for tackling difficult policy and operational problems that local agencies face. It can also be a productive way of achieving more efficient and effective use of scarce resources. However, partnership working is difficult to do successfully and may be costly: partnerships can be justified only when their achievements outweigh the resources they consume.

The Audit Commission’s management paper A Fruitful Partnership aims to help authority members and senior officers in local government, the police and the NHS to make better decisions about when to set up a partnership and to improve the effectiveness of existing and future partnerships. Other organisations involved in partnerships may also find this publication useful.

A Fruitful Partnership follows the main stages in the life cycle of a partnership, outlining the likely problems at each stage and some ways of forestalling them.

It covers:
- Deciding to go into partnership
- Getting started
- Operating efficiently and effectively
- Reviewing the partnership’s success
- What partnerships can expect to achieve

The paper contains a total of 17 case studies and each section ends with a set of key questions that are drawn together in the centre of the paper in a pull-out checklist.

The paper does not specifically address contractual arrangements between public and private bodies (including Private Finance Initiative projects) for delivery of services, although much of the good practice described may be of relevance.

Background

Working in partnership with other external organisations is a critical task for councils and police forces, in common with health authorities, NHS trusts and other public agencies. The number of partnerships is growing, both as a response to central government requirements (e.g. Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Youth Offending Teams, Education Action Zones and Early Years Development Plans) and as a result of local initiatives.

Refer to:
- A Fruitful Partnership
- Effective Partnership Working
- Promising Beginnings
  A Compendium of Initiatives to Improve Joint Working in Local Government
  Wirobound Compendium, 1998, 1862401187, £25

See also:
- Less Dangerous Liaisons
  Early Considerations for Making Mergers Work
  Management Paper, 1995, 0118864408, £6
The companion compendium *Promising Beginnings* highlights an extensive range of local government initiatives involving joint working following local government reorganisation. The compendium is intended primarily to raise awareness of these initiatives and to challenge all authorities to address this agenda.

Three key concepts underpin the work:
- *letting out* better information about services;
- *letting in* the community to influence the council’s decisions on service priorities and standards; and
- eventually *letting go* and allowing other organisations to play a part in delivering local services.

*Promising Beginnings* contains 23 full case studies and many more examples of good practice and innovation. A wide range of council services and functions is covered in the compendium, including:
- Libraries
- Community safety
- Social services
- Leisure
- Economic development and regeneration

- Council Tax
- Planning
- Waste management
- Highways
- Town centre development

**Key findings**
- Partnership working was well established in the public sector and there was some evidence that it was bringing real benefits.
- Partnerships could improve public services by generating solutions to problems that single agencies cannot solve, improving the co-ordination of services across organisational boundaries and making better use of existing resources.
- Partnerships could also exert greater influence than their individual members could achieve. They could, therefore, play a potentially powerful role in local community governance, bringing together those who can best act as advocates for a range of interests.
- However the benefits of partnerships have a cost and could make lines of political and financial accountability less clear than when agencies work alone.
- Where entering into a partnership voluntarily, agencies should consider carefully what they hope to achieve and examine whether there are simpler ways of realising these objectives. Alternatives might include:
  - consultative arrangements where a single agency retains responsibility for decisions and actions;
  - networks of personal or professional relationships that do not involve organisational commitment; and
  - contractual relationships.

**Key recommendations**
- The agencies involved in the partnership need to have clear, shared objectives.
- There should be a realistic plan and timetable for achieving these objectives.
- There needs to be commitment from all agencies to take account of the partnership’s work when planning mainstream services.
- There needs to be a clear framework of responsibilities and accountability.
- To be successful, there needs to be a high level of trust between partners.
- There should be realistic ways of reviewing the success of the partnership’s work. This should involve an understanding of the costs of partnership, the use of appropriate performance indicators, as well as other methods of evaluation such as user surveys, focus groups or a formal independent evaluation study.
Consultation

Consultation is a process of dialogue that leads to a decision. It can be a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring that policymakers stay in touch with citizens. Legislation is requiring public bodies to consult their communities more extensively than they have in the past. As consultation becomes more widespread, the local agenda may be set increasingly by local people, and less by authorities. Authorities should not see this as a threat. It is an opportunity to draw on the expertise that exists in their communities and use it to improve services.

The growth of consultation could bring significant benefits. However, this will happen only if consultation exercises are carefully planned, imaginatively designed, competently carried out and then used to inform decision-making. Indications from best value pilot reviews are that this is not always the case. This is something that the Commission is likely to keep under review over the next few years.

The Commission’s publication *Listen Up!* aims to help officers and members secure the benefit that consultation can offer and get good value from the resources that they invest in it.

The paper covers:
- what consultation is;
- planning consultation;
- overcoming common obstacles to effective consultation;
- principles of good practice; and
- evaluating effectiveness.

It concentrates on consulting local people, but the good practice described could also be applied to consultation with businesses, partner organisations and other external bodies. Fourteen case studies show how different authorities have tackled the challenges of consultation. There are also checklists bringing together key questions for authorities evaluating their consultation work.

Since much good material has already been published on different consultation methodologies, these are not discussed in detail in the paper, although there is an appendix containing a list of useful publications.

While *Listen Up!* discusses effective consultation with communities, an earlier Commission publication *Talk Back*, focused on the role of the Public Relations (PR) function in external communications. It discusses not only how the PR function can deal effectively with the media directly, but also how it can support mainstream departments in their external communications.

*Talk Back* also describes how an authority can carry out a communications audit to assess whether it is communicating effectively. It may provide a good starting point for local authorities seeking to evaluate and improve their communications functions.

*Is Anybody There?* was produced to help local authorities respond to the Citizen’s Charter requirement to monitor their performance in answering letters and telephone calls. While there is no longer a requirement to publish such information, the publication may still be useful for authorities wishing to improve their performance in this area.

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Refer to:

*Is Anybody There?*
- Improving Performance in Answering Letters and Telephones
- Paper, 1994, 011886128X, £5

*Talk Back*
- Local Authority Communication with Citizens
- National Report, 1995, 0118861328, £8

*Listen Up!*
- Effective Community Consultation
- Management Paper, 1999, 1862401969, £15

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Key findings

- Effective consultation was not easy to achieve. Many organisations have struggled to get a cross-section of people engaged in consultation, rather than a narrow self-selecting group.
- The quality of individual consultation exercises varied considerably.
- Consultees often disagreed with one another, so interpreting the results could be difficult.
- The views of consultees needed to be balanced with other factors that affected decisions, such as resources and statutory requirements.
- Some authorities found it difficult to reconcile direct community consultation with the role of members as decision-makers.
- The majority of authorities did not consistently use consultation results to inform decisions.
- Very few authorities had managed to work with partner organisations to carry out ‘joined up’ consultation programmes.
- Few authorities evaluated their consultation programmes.

Key recommendations

Listen Up! sets out four main principles of good practice. Consultation should be:

- related to a decision that the authority intends to take and that can be influenced by the outcome of the consultation;
- well designed and executed;
- inclusive; and
- analysed and used effectively in practice.

Authorities should:

- carry out all consultation work to consistently high standards;
- develop the skills and tools needed to match available consultation techniques to each consultation exercise;
- take advantage of new technology and methods, alongside the best of traditional techniques;
- encourage all parts of the community to participate in consultation and take positive steps to prevent minority groups being excluded;
- use consultation to inform decisions;
- evaluate the cost and effectiveness of consultation programmes; and
- consult jointly with other organisations, so that single exercises can feed into a number of agencies’ plans.
Management consultants

Background
The use of management consultants is well established in local government. They can be especially valuable where there is a lack of in-house skills, to meet short time scales or to provide independent review. However, during the early 1990s there were a number of well-publicised failures of large consultancy projects in the public sector. Earlier studies by District Audit showed that authorities had a poor record of implementing consultants’ recommendations. They found weaknesses in the procedures used to select consultants and in the management of consultancy contracts. Poor management of consultancy projects is a waste of a very expensive resource and, in addition, where proper procedures for selecting and appointing consultants are not followed, officers and members can find themselves facing serious criticism.

There is evidence that, with the advent of best value, local authorities are making increasing use of management consultants. Reaching the Peak? identified the steps that local councils and other public bodies need to take to ensure that they get value for money from their management consultants. It included a checklist of good practice, that was designed to be of practical assistance to project managers when commissioning and managing consultants. The study drew upon information gathered from in-depth fieldwork at nine local authorities and eight health authorities across England and Wales.

In some ways the management consultancy market has changed since the publication of Reaching the Peak? For example, there have been significant increases in the numbers of independent consultants working in the best value arena, whilst the larger consultancy firms are preferring to work on much bigger contracts. New products, such as benchmarking group facilitation and electronic tools, have also emerged. However, the same basic principles still apply concerning the specification and control of work and the letting of contracts.
Key recommendations
Councils employing consultants should:

- produce corporate guidelines on preparing project briefs and terms of reference;
- review their standing orders relating to contractors to make sure they are clear, comprehensive and easy to use;
- ensure that competitive procedures are observed;
- make sure that the selection criteria for consultants are clearly specified in advance, particularly where they need to be based on factors other than cost. Specifying a price range when tenders are invited can make it easier for consultants to assess the scope of the project and the final decision can then be made primarily on the basis of quality;
- establish written agreements with consultants before work starts. Contracts should be price-fixed, payments should be linked to the completion of tasks and the types of expenses that will be paid should be specified;
- refer decisions on the choice of consultants for larger projects to an appropriate board or committee;
- develop codes of practice for contract management and establish systems for monitoring the progress of projects, and the standards and targets to be reached;
- improve budgetary control. Separate budget codes should be used for individual consultancy projects. Managers should make sure that payments to consultants can be tracked through the financial system;
- set up a central consultancy project reference file, containing a brief description of the project, name of the consultancy firm and client department, and estimated cost, as well as a contract file for each consultancy project; and
- evaluate all but the shortest projects on the basis of whether the work was completed on time and within budget, the extent to which objectives were achieved and the quality of in-house project management.

Councils employing consultants should ensure that competitive procedures are observed.
Assets

Asset management

The Audit Commission first examined local authority property management in 1988. The resulting report concluded that property was an under-managed resource and that, while technical skills were often strong, the corporate or strategic function was underdeveloped.

Key findings

- Many councils still treated property as a fixed asset, rather than as a strategic resource. Property management needed to be incorporated into mainstream corporate planning processes.
- Authorities often failed to challenge why they owned so much land and property (especially non-operational property), and to review the way in which they organised and obtained property services.
- Political parochialism, or a failure to think corporately, could stifle innovation and present a barrier to optimal resource use.
- Councils had insufficient management information to support decisions about how best to manage their assets. In addition, some failed to establish financial and managerial procedures that would ensure accountability for property at both officer and member levels.
- External legal and financial constraints (most notably the capital control system) could limit councils’ flexibility to apply the most suitable solutions to local needs.
- DETR proposals to invite annual submission of Asset Management Plans (AMPs) as part of the allocation of capital funds should help raise the status of asset management within local authorities.

Background

At the time of the Commission’s report, Hot Property, councils in England and Wales owned property assets valued in excess of £120 billion, or £65 billion excluding council housing. As well as assets used to deliver services (such as schools, libraries, leisure facilities and social services homes), local authorities owned around £7 billion worth of commercial and other non-operational property.
Key recommendations

- Authorities should clearly identify responsibility for strategic asset management at both officer and member levels.
- Councils should develop AMPs in accordance with DETR guidelines, setting out the sufficiency, suitability and cost of existing assets, needs for the future, and how these will be met.
- Councils should review and challenge asset holdings, within the best value framework, disposing of those that do not support core service objectives or that fail to make an adequate return on investment.
- Authorities should identify performance measures and targets for service, administrative and non-operational property: in particular, targets should be set for reducing administrative accommodation, where applicable, through innovative working practices such as hot-desking and home-working.
- Within devolved financial management structures, wherever possible, budgets should be aligned with managerial responsibility for property.
- Authorities need to establish workable incentives to ensure that individual departments use property resources in the wider corporate interest.
- Within councils’ political structures, property should be a cabinet-level issue, with one member having lead responsibility.
- Local authorities need to explore, using information and communications technology, how to improve accessibility to services without raising property costs.
- Similarly, they should share property with other local agencies wherever feasible.
- Elected members should encourage and support officers in these modernising initiatives, even though this will sometimes require difficult decisions to close facilities in order better to meet need across the authority as a whole.
- The provision and procurement of property services should be subject to rigorous best value review. Property services departments need to adopt a stronger customer focus, matching provision to the needs of service clients.
- Central government should take the lead in co-ordinating a consistent approach to data collection and measurement through AMPs and, following consultation, identify a small number of national asset management performance indicators.
- Government might consider accelerating research into alternatives to the existing capital control system.
Capital expenditure and project management

Refer to:
- Just Capital
  Local Authority Management of Capital Projects
  National Report, 1996, 0118864351, £12
- Rome Wasn’t Built in a Day
  Getting Value for Money from Capital Programmes and Construction Projects
- Capital Gains
  Improving the Local Government Capital Expenditure System
  National Report, 1997, 1862400318, £20
- Capital Gains Technical Supplement
  Improving the Local Government Capital Expenditure System
  Technical Supplement, 1997, 1862400326, £15
- Taking the Initiative
  A Framework for Purchasing under the Private Finance Initiative
  Management Paper, 1998, 1862401195, £15

See also:
- Hot Property
  Getting the Best from Local Authority Assets
  National Report, 2000, 1862402205, £20

Background

Each year local authorities spend about £7 billion acquiring or refurbishing capital assets. This level of investment is dwarfed by the scale of their existing assets, consisting principally of housing, schools and roads, with a total value in excess of £120 billion. Many of these assets are in poor condition or do not meet the needs of current services. As a consequence, in the Capital Gains Technical Supplement, the Commission estimated that demand for capital funding would outstrip resources by £15 billion over the following five years. Best value has to be delivered from scarce capital resources.

The foundation for successful capital investment is good project management. In Just Capital the Commission looked at best practice from a range of local authorities. This was evaluated against the new higher standards that the construction industry had just set itself in a wide-ranging review published as a report entitled Constructing the Team.

During the closing years of the last Government the specification of projects was increasingly driven by the need to achieve success in competitive bidding regimes. Some of these, such as Challenge Funding, replaced other capital resource allocations from central Government. Other bidding regimes, such as the National Lottery, represented completely new sources of funding.

While these initiatives reward innovation and consistency with central Government objectives, they have some drawbacks. Challenge Funding often favoured glamorous, non-essential projects over less exciting, yet vital, schemes. Scarce resources were not targeted at the areas of greatest need. Similarly, bidding for National Lottery money could distort an authority’s priorities if it submitted schemes that would secure funding rather than those that were its highest priority.

To prevent capital investment being distorted by the allure of available funding, the Commission’s management handbook Rome Wasn’t Built in a Day stressed the need for comprehensive capital programmes that reflected the individual strategic vision of each local authority.

In Capital Gains, a study of the capital expenditure system, the Commission recognised that the efforts of authorities to achieve effective capital programming were hampered by the short-term time horizon of the Government’s capital expenditure system. Too many authorities responded, however, by also having excessively short-term capital budgeting.

The timing of the Commission’s recommendations helped set the agenda for the present Government’s review of the capital control system in its Modernising Local Government consultation paper on capital finance.
The Government’s current proposal to base capital resource allocations on a corporate, rather than service based, assessment of need will favour those authorities that take a strategic view. The accompanying proposal, to also take into account an assessment of councils’ service and corporate capital strategies, could bring the capital control system more firmly into alignment with the best value regime.

The Government is also exploring the possibility of making this relationship with best value even closer by introducing a new capital control system based on financial and service based performance indicators. The starting point for this proposal will be the report Measurement of Relative Need for Capital Expenditure commissioned by the Government from Pricewaterhousecoopers.

Soon after coming into office in 1997, the Government used the Comprehensive Spending Review and the Capital Receipts Initiative to relieve the immediate pressure and uncertainty in local authority capital programmes. It does, however, share the previous Government’s long-term strategy of addressing the shortage of local authority capital investment through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

**The foundation for successful capital investment is good project management.**

These initiatives require local authorities to make use of scarce revenue budgets. A PFI contract is a long-term commitment that could restrict flexibility to adjust service delivery to new circumstances. For this reason, in the management paper *Taking the Initiative*, the Commission stressed the need for members in particular to have a sound basic understanding of the relative advantages and disadvantages of PFI as a procurement strategy.

*Taking the Initiative* covers:
- Main features of PFI
- Planning PFI procurement
- Working with the private sector
- A framework for PFI procurement
- Conclusions for councillors and board members

Since the Commission’s management paper *Taking the Initiative* the Government’s Construction Task Force has, in its report *Rethinking Construction*, also stressed the need for the public sector to be best practice clients that can work in closer and longer-term partnership with contractors while maintaining high standards of probity. This is the greatest challenge facing local authorities seeking best value from capital investment from PFI.

**Key findings**

- Too few authorities had comprehensive stock condition information that could inform capital investment decisions.
- One-third of authorities lacked the necessary mechanisms to ensure effective corporate control. As a consequence their capital resources were channelled into departmental schemes at the expense of broadly based strategic initiatives.
- While over half of all authorities surveyed had attempted to establish medium-term strategies, one-quarter of authorities were planning just one year at a time.
- The lack of long-term planning led to the procurement process being rushed. Insufficient attention was given to the specification and contractors were not given sufficient time to tender. As a consequence, in more than one-third of the projects surveyed, provisional sums and contingencies were substantial.
- In two out of five projects surveyed, there was a significant difference between the estimated cost at final design stage and the lowest tender.
Too often, estimates for the whole project became budget ceilings and were not increased when a higher than expected tender was accepted for the construction phase of the project. Higher than expected construction costs had to be met by unplanned savings in the cost of fitting out the building or in the cost of supporting infrastructure and landscaping work.

There was no evidence to suggest that either internal or external technical services were more economical: there was wide variation in the costs of both sources of consultancy. But the reliability of the data may have been affected by the fact that many authorities were not ensuring that all the costs of professional services were being fully charged to individual projects.

Two-thirds of the projects surveyed were completed behind schedule and one-quarter were significantly outside the contract cost. Few authorities had management information systems that could give decision-makers timely warning of these difficulties; and rarely were there post project reviews to identify lessons for the future.

**Key recommendations**

- Authorities need to take a more strategic and longer-term approach to capital programming.
- Stock condition surveys and property databases should be used to give an objective basis for capital programming.
- Planned maintenance budgets should be kept at levels that reflect realistic judgements of future capital resources.
- Where assets have high maintenance demands that are unlikely to be financed at current resource levels the authority should consider an appropriate disposal strategy. If this expensive asset provides an essential service then a PFI scheme may be an appropriate strategy.
- It is possible that best value will be achieved by combining the use of internal technical services with the purchase of external services to meet peak loads or specialist requirements. Only a rigorous management accounting framework will be able to demonstrate this.
- Capital projects need to meet clearly specified service needs that have been identified and understood from the beginning by their sponsors, managers and end-users.

- Authorities should have clear procedures for ensuring that all appropriate projects are included in their capital programmes. These projects need to be clearly specified and costed, so that informed decisions can be made about which projects should go ahead.
- The use of feasibility studies is one means of ensuring that only those schemes that are ready to proceed will be allocated scarce resources in the capital programme. These studies can also provide a means of prioritising schemes for any new funding opportunity.
- Project teams should have a clear understanding of their members’ roles and responsibilities, and efficient channels for communication, in order to work together effectively.
Internal audit

Since this work was published expectations of the role of internal audit have changed from the relatively narrow focus on the avoidance of financial loss to embrace a wider role concerning the management of business risks (financial and operational), corporate governance and the internal control framework as a whole.

Best value will fundamentally change the way that authorities work and this will have a major effect on the coverage of internal audit and how it assesses risk. In its management paper An Inside Job? the Audit Commission considers how best value will affect internal audit’s remit and examines the potential role for internal audit in best value. The Government’s guidance to authorities on best value highlights the potential contribution of the internal audit function: ‘internal auditors have a key role to play in all aspects of best value’, and also recommends that each authority include a ‘statement of responsibility’ in its best value performance plan, acknowledging that it is ‘responsible for setting in place appropriate performance management and internal control systems from which the information and assessments in the performance plan have been derived.’ If authorities are to sign up to such a statement they will look to internal audit to provide them with the necessary assurances.

The Commission is currently reviewing The Managed Audit in accordance with the revised Code of Audit Practice and the changing environment in local government and health.

Key recommendations

Counting Down to Competition

The discussion of the internal audit function in the Audit Commission’s handbook on the management of financial support services, is set in the context of the narrower definition of the internal audit role prevailing at the time: the aim of the internal audit section was to minimise potential loss to an authority arising from mismanagement, error, negligence or fraud. Adequacy of audit coverage through use of a rigorous risk assessment was therefore emphasised. The management handbook recommended that internal audit managers needed to:

- plan – according to a rigorous assessment of risk – and manage the audit function effectively, including liaison with the external auditor;
- ensure appropriate resources are employed and that individual audits are delivered to a high standard;
- undertake systems-based audits (including computer and contract audits); and
- undertake investigative audits and respond to service department requests.
An Inside Job?

In its management paper An Inside Job? the Commission envisages a wider role for internal audit. It considers the effect of best value on internal audit’s remit and its potential role in the best value regime.

It recommends that:

- In order to provide objective assurance in relation to best value, internal audit should as a minimum:
  - provide assurance that the authority has set in place adequate arrangements for self-assessment and that the corporate framework is being followed;
  - ensure that the best value review programme is taken into account in risk-based audit planning, in terms both of its effect on the internal control environment and the timing of audit work; and
  - ensure that it has a detailed understanding of the requirements of best value, that it keeps abreast of developments in best value, and that it appreciates how the authority is implementing best value.

- In addition to these minimum requirements, authorities could invite internal audit to play a wider role in relation to best value. For example, internal auditors could:
  - advise on the selection of functions for best value reviews;
  - advise on the development of processes to manage best value;
  - advise on (or participate in) best value reviews as a source of internal challenge; and
  - help the authority to assess whether the four best value principles of challenge, comparison, consultation and competition are being addressed.

But internal audit must focus only on these wider areas once it has been able to demonstrate that its core role is being delivered to an appropriate standard, and it must maintain its proper degree of independence within the authority.

The Managed Audit
It Takes Two

The Commission is currently reviewing The Managed Audit. Findings to date suggest that:

- the principles of The Managed Audit remain valid;
- putting principles into practice successfully varies amongst audited bodies; and
- there are many examples of good practice that could be shared more widely (for example, joint risk assessment and training)

A new publication is planned, covering good practice examples, promoting partnership and relating the principles of the managed audit to the Code of Audit Practice.
**Income and charging**

**Background**
Councils set over 600 user charges for services ranging from leisure centres to home care. Across England and Wales these raise £6 billion each year (excluding rents), compared with £9 billion raised by council tax.

Councils have discretion in setting these charges in a number of important areas (for example, car parking, leisure, certain social services and environmental health).

But charges can do more than simply raise income. They can play a significant role in the achievement of wider council objectives, from tackling social inclusion or protecting the environment, to improving the health of the population. For example, a well-designed concession policy can help promote access to services and the take-up of benefits. As well as raising income, charges can be used to control access; respond to competition; fund investment; and influence user behaviour in different ways.

The Commission’s report *The Price is Right?* drew on fieldwork in 13 local authorities, as well as information from a number of service specific professional bodies. This was followed by a separate report, *Charging with Care*, which examined how councils charge for home care.

**Key findings**
- The report found that charges were often poorly managed, with short-term budget requirements dominating over a more considered approach – most prices were simply increased each year in line with inflation. Review processes often lacked basic information about users and competition. Less than one-third of charging decisions considered the impact of past price changes.
- The report found wide variations in charges between similar authorities: for example, between £1.15 and £4 for an adult swim or between £100 and £450 for burials – with little rationale in terms of factors such as local market conditions or user preferences.
- Councils had little idea of what they wanted charges to deliver:
  - fundamental questions of principle remained unresolved;
  - links to policy priorities were often missed (only 20 per cent of anti-poverty strategies linked access to services with concession policies); and
  - charges were often managed in isolation from service plans: specific objectives and targets for charges were rarely set, other than to meet budgets.

Refer to:
*The Price is Right? Charges for Council Services*
National Report, 1999, 1862401519, £20

See also:
*Charging with Care How Councils Charge for Home Care*
National Report, 2000, 1862402221, £20
As a consequence, charges were not used to their full potential. Damage could be done to a range of objectives: financial – as subsidy was misdirected or charging opportunities were missed; corporate – where, for example, car park prices were set that contradicted town centre policies; or service related – where misunderstanding of the role of price could damage access to, or quality of, services.

Key recommendations

Councils need to refocus their attention concerning charges and address the key success factors that characterise those councils getting the most from them. They need to:

- establish clear principles for charging: which services? which users? what levels of subsidy?;
- integrate charging into service management and forge links with corporate objectives;
- set clear objectives and targets to quantify success in charging (beyond simple income targets);
- build an understanding of users and markets;
- improve decision-making by taking into account the likely impact of changes to charges; and
- innovate through imaginative use of charging structures.

The report introduced a model, ‘the charging cycle’, that local authorities can use to manage charging more effectively. It also showed how the current, unsatisfactory position can be resolved: at the council level, by using the opportunities provided by best value reviews, and at the national level, by reviewing the current legal framework.

Councils set over 600 user charges for services ranging from leisure centres to home care.
Financial support services

The financial framework in local government has traditionally concentrated on the corporate tasks of preparing budgets and ensuring guardianship of the authority’s financial position. However, a number of developments, in particular the introduction of CCT for white collar services and, more recently, best value, have compelled finance managers to review the services they deliver to front-line departments. Within the best value regime the need to demonstrate challenge and evidence comparison of performance and competitiveness will put pressure on all support services.

The financial support services publications, though written in the context of CCT, contain a range of information that will also prove useful to authorities carrying out best value reviews, for example:

- unit cost data covering staff, IT, accommodation and other costs for all six services – costs will need to be reviewed, but the methodology for collecting them remains the same;
- efficiency measures that will both demonstrate opportunities for improvement and, more importantly, highlight where an authority does not have the necessary volumes to be efficient; and
- qualitative measures, so that authorities can make informed decisions about the level of service they want.

Key findings

- For payroll and creditor services, most authorities achieved consistently high standards of administration – generally staff were paid on time and suppliers’ invoices were settled within an acceptable timescale. However, standards for debtors and for cashiers varied significantly between authorities.
- There was no evidence that high standards necessitated high costs. In some authorities there was duplication of effort between central and service department finance staff, sometimes due to a ‘centralist’ approach to the discharging of s151 responsibilities. Yet many authorities were able to ensure the guardianship of their finances without detailed central control and higher attendant costs.
- The relative merits of devolution versus centralisation of financial support services and outsourcing are important best value considerations. Counting Down to Competition gives advice on how the quality of service standards can be appraised. Within the best value framework it will also be important to take into account user views.

Background

The Audit Commission’s 1995 study focused on six key financial support services: accountancy, internal audit, payroll, creditor payments, sundry debtors and cashiers.
For transaction-based services, many authorities still had scope to reduce service costs, for example, by changing their payroll arrangements to produce payslips on a monthly rather than weekly basis, and by reducing the number of sundry debtors’ invoices through greater use of prepayment facilities.

For some services – for instance payroll – there was a scale effect that made in-house provision uncompetitive in small authorities.

It was difficult to establish an exact formula for levels of internal audit coverage. Authorities could best determine the appropriate level of coverage by a rigorous assessment of risk in their systems and operations. The Commission gives further consideration to the role of internal audit in An Inside Job?: Internal Audit and Best Value (see separate compendium entry).

**Key recommendations**

- Authorities should assess the extent to which their current service provision is appropriate, exploring trade-offs between costs and standards.

• Authorities should assess the extent to which their current service provision is appropriate, exploring trade-offs between costs and standards where these exist, and consider whether they are satisfied with the type of service being delivered.

• Finance directors should review the scope for discharging section 151 responsibilities effectively through devolved financial management arrangements.

• Providers should ensure that their unit costs match best practice benchmarks and, where they do not, identify improvement opportunities.
Housing benefit administration

**Background**

By 1996, benefit fraud was the major probity issue facing local government. Authorities were identifying losses of £55 million each year, but the Department of Social Security (DSS) estimated that the true figure, was about £900 million per year; some local authority fraud investigators argued that the losses were £2 billion a year or more. About 4 million households were relying on this means-tested benefit to pay, or help to pay, their rent.

Fraud could be difficult to distinguish from error...

Councils work to complex regulations drawn up by the DSS. The Audit Commission and the National Audit Office (NAO), which audits the Department of Social Security (DSS) and the Benefits Agency, carried out a joint study into housing benefit fraud between 1996 and 1997. The Commission’s report *Fraud and Lodging* was published as a result. Subsequently, the Commission’s auditors examined arrangements in individual councils.

The Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997 (‘the Fraud Act’) gave local authorities new powers to help them to combat benefit fraud and led to the creation of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

In 1999, the Commission published a follow-up report, which found that housing benefit administration was poor in nearly one-half of councils and that, according to the DSS, fraud and error were, together, costing £840 million a year. Later in 1999, the Commission’s *Protecting the Public Purse* update reported that identified losses to housing benefit fraud had risen to £95 million a year and that benefit fraud by council staff and councillors affected one in eight councils.
Key findings

- Fraud could be difficult to distinguish from error, since honest claimants could be confused by the complex regulations.
- The DSS’s estimates of the cost of fraud and error were the best available figures.
- Most frauds involved failures by people receiving benefit to report changes in their circumstances that reduced or ended entitlement. Only a minority involved deception when first claiming benefit.
- Overall, fraud most commonly involved a failure to report, or the under-reporting of, earnings. But non-residency was the most common type of fraud among claimants from the private rented sector.
- Much housing benefit fraud occurred because people deceived the Benefits Agency or did not report changes in circumstances to it. This was because most housing benefit claimants received income support or jobseeker’s allowance from the Agency and entered local authority systems through these ‘gateways’. The means tests for the three benefits are similar and authorities therefore relied upon the verifications carried out by the Agency.
- One part of the mechanism by which the DSS contributes to the cost of paying and administering the benefit, the Weekly Benefits Savings (WBS) subsidy, encouraged authorities to detect fraud after it had occurred rather than to prevent fraud.
- The management and quality assurance of investigative work often had weaknesses: the amount of fraud detected and WBS subsidy claimed was commonly inflated by local authority and Benefits Agency staff.
- Prosecutions for fraud were rare, while overpaid benefit was not always recovered.
- Co-operation between the Benefits Agency and authorities was often poor.

Key recommendations

- Authorities should agree corporate counter-fraud strategies, that incorporate codes of conduct for officers and members. Revised codes of conduct will be required under the ‘new ethical framework’ provisions of the current Local Government Bill.
- Councils should adopt the DSS’s verification framework, which sets out the checks to perform before paying benefit and to ensure that people receiving benefit are still entitled to it.
- Fraud investigators should receive procedural guidance and training.
- Authorities should improve the quality assurance of their investigators’ work.
- Authorities should analyse the costs and benefits of different investigative approaches, and consider increasing investigative resources where potential savings could outweigh costs.
- Authorities should visit benefit claimants, encourage administrative staff to refer possible frauds for investigation and participate in the Audit Commission’s National Fraud Initiative exercise and in DSS data-matching exercises.
- Members should agree a policy on prosecution and on the use of the fixed penalty for benefit fraud introduced by the Fraud Act.
- Authorities should recover more overpayments.
- The DSS, the Benefits Agency and local authorities should work to improve co-operation and the exchange of information between the Agency and councils.
- The DSS should simplify the complex rules governing entitlement and amend subsidy arrangements to reward the prevention, as well as the detection, of fraud.
- The DSS and the Benefits Agency should improve the verification of entitlement to income support and jobseeker’s allowance.
Protecting the public purse

Refer to:
Protecting the Public Purse – Probity in the Public Sector Combating Fraud and Corruption in Local Government
National Report, 1993, 0118861782, £9

Fraud and Corruption Audit Manual
Ringbinder, 1994, 1862400261, £95 (currently being updated)

Called to Account
The Role of Audit Committees in Local Government
Management Paper, 1996, 0118864505, £6

Protecting the Public Purse
Ensuring Probit in Local Government – Update 1997
Update, 1997, 1862400571, £10

Protecting the Public Purse
Ensuring Probit in Local Government – Update 1998
Update, 1998, 186240125X, £10

Worth More than Money
The Role of the Local Government Finance Director
Management Paper, 1998, 1862400563, £10

Protecting the Public Purse
Ensuring Probit in Local Government – Update 1999
Update, 1999, 1862401993, £10

See also:
Opportunity Makes a Thief
An Analysis of Computer Abuse
National Report, 1994, 0118861379, £8.50

Fraud and Lodging
Tackling Fraud and Error in Housing Benefit
National Report, 1997, 1862400466, £20

Fraud and Lodging
Progress in Tackling Fraud and Error in Housing Benefit
Update, 1999, 1862401322, £10

Ghost in the Machine
An Analysis of IT Fraud and Abuse
Update, 1998, 1862400563, £15

How Should you React to a Suspected Fraud or Corruption?
100 pack leaflets for managers, 1999, 1862401640, £8.50

What Should you Do if you Suspect Fraud or Corruption?
100 pack leaflets for employees, 1999, 1862401632, £8.50

Background
At the end of 1993 the Audit Commission published its first Protecting the Public Purse report on the extent of fraud and corruption within local government. It set out good practice for prevention and detection and made a number of recommendations for central and local government and the police.

Since then the Commission has undertaken regular surveys in order to produce annual updates on the levels of fraud and corruption, along with details of new and developing trends in their incidence.

While authorities have succeeded in detecting increased levels of fraud, known risks still remain. The surveys to date have indicated that 99 per cent of all detected cases involve abuse of the benefits system, with benefit fraud still on the increase. The National Fraud Initiative data-matching exercises are completed annually and cover mainly housing benefit, student awards, payroll and pensions data. They have been running nationally since 1997 and, to date, councils have identified over £70m of fraud from these. Some disturbing new trends are also emerging: the 1999 survey found that pension and payroll fraud had risen and contract fraud causes continuing concern.
The Commission has also charted in its updates the progress that authorities have made in implementing the recommendations made in its 1993 report. In general, authorities have responded positively to the challenge posed by fraud, with many implementing the good practice set out in successive Protecting the Public Purse publications. The adoption of a strong anti-fraud culture in many authorities has led to increased levels of detected fraud. Over £400 million worth of fraud has been uncovered in the years since the original report. However, the 1999 survey still found a large number of councils without explicit anti-fraud strategies.

Councils need to send a clear signal from the top that fraud will not be tolerated. The Commission’s management paper, Called to Account, reported that most councils had no single committee with a remit sufficiently comprehensive to deal with promoting internal control, focusing audit resources and monitoring audit performance. The report recommended that authorities make effective corporate commitments to combating fraud through establishing audit committees.

The Nolan report on local government commented upon the damage done by several highly publicised instances of alleged financial impropriety by officers and members. Recognising local government’s concern at the way its image had been tarnished, the Audit Commission addressed the issue of public confidence in the probity of local authorities in Worth More than Money, its Management Paper on the role of the chief finance officer.

Worth More than Money explores the finance director’s pivotal role in local government, making sure that councils use resources properly and obtain the best possible value for money. The role contains inherent tensions: finance directors must combine a robust approach to financial probity with a constructive, enabling approach to financial strategy and management.

Changes in political and officer management arrangements have prompted debate about the work of finance directors. Effective use and control of public money are so important that there must be one member of every council’s top management team who is responsible for financial management. Within this basic requirement, a variety of management arrangements can be effective. Other important factors include the way in which the finance director approaches the job, the calibre of financial support staff and the working relationship that the finance director has with councillors, the chief executive and other senior officers.

Whistleblowers are now protected from unjust recrimination by the Public Interest Disclosure Act (PIDA) 1998. It is vital that an authority has in place formal arrangements for employees to express concerns and suspicions. This was a key message in the Commission’s original report on combating fraud and corruption in local government, Protecting the Public Purse (1993). In Worth More than Money, published in the same year as the Act, the Commission advocated the inclusion of whistleblowing arrangements in the plans chief finance officers should develop to review and strengthen their authorities’ corporate governance.

The ‘new ethical framework’ proposed under the Local Government Bill will require registers of interest and hospitality to be maintained. Every council will have to establish a standards committee. National Standards Boards will deal with incidents of misconduct.
Key findings

Called to Account

- Very few authorities had an audit committee.
- Instead of undertaking a continuous review of the control environment to uncover existing problems and prevent future ones developing, some audit committees were set up to deal with a specific issue, such as an outbreak of major fraud, and then allowed to lapse or disband once it had been dealt with.
- Authorities that had an audit committee benefited from:
  - better anti-fraud awareness and action;
  - more systematic appraisal of internal controls;
  - better integration of internal and external audit;
  - more effective follow-up and implementation of audit recommendations; and
  - quicker response times by service managers charged with their implementation.

Fraud and corruption survey (1999)

- One-quarter of authorities still did not have anti-fraud and -corruption strategies.
- One-quarter of authorities still did not have a designated police contact.
- One-half of authorities did not have in place formal whistle-blowing arrangements that complied with PIDA.
- Three-quarters of authorities had not yet set up a Standards Committee.

Key recommendations

Protecting the Public Purse (1993)

- Authorities should prepare and implement a corporate anti-fraud and -corruption strategy.
- Formal arrangements should be put in place to enable employees, and others who suspect fraud and corruption, to express their concerns both with and in confidence.
- Registers should be kept of both members’ and officers’ interests and of hospitality received by members and officers.
- Authorities should maintain a code of conduct for members and officers.
- Liaison with the police should be established and links with a designated contact maintained.

Worth More than Money

Effective finance directors contribute to their authorities by:

- planning forward-looking financial strategies, including appropriate strategies to increase available resources;
- supporting councillors’ decision-making and scrutiny roles;
- providing financial advice to councillors and officers;
- overseeing sound financial administration and stewardship;
- contributing constructively to corporate management;
- ensuring partnerships make good use of resources; and
- building public confidence in the probity of local government.

To be successful, finance directors must find the right balance between operational, regulatory and strategic activities.
IT security

The key objectives of the Government’s public sector change agenda were set out in the Modernising Government White Paper. They are to:

- focus on outcomes;
- improve the quality of services;
- encourage more partnership working with the voluntary and private sectors;
- organise services around the convenience of customers;
- harness technology to help deliver these services; and
- adopt a longer-term strategic approach to planning.

The Government sees technology as playing a major role in achieving these objectives and has set target dates by which all dealings with government should be possible electronically.

If staff responsible for the delivery of public services are to exchange information and enable citizens to interact electronically with government at all levels, then complete... They cover local and central government, the NHS, other public sector bodies and middle- and large-scale private companies.

A key message from the Commission’s surveys has been that most breaches of IT security occur as a result of a lack of basic controls and effective monitoring procedures. Frauds may involve fraudulent input or alteration of data, manipulation of output and unauthorised amendment of programs. The 1997 Protecting the Public Purse survey found that all major financial systems such as payroll, debtors, creditors, stocks and claims systems were at risk.

An important indicator of how seriously an organisation takes computer security is how it deals with perpetrators of abuse. Internal controls need to be supported by a robust disciplinary process. The 1997 survey found that management often failed to act when abuse was uncovered.

The most significant IT development in the last few years has been the internet. Because it is not a controlled environment and access is easy to obtain, there are risks associated with its use – for example, unauthorised access to information and systems. In Ghost in the Machine, which was based on data from the 1997 survey, the Audit Commission predicted that use of the internet and the application of internet technology to internal systems were likely to be the major security challenges facing organisations in the new millennium.

The survey found that virus infections continued to be the most common form of IT abuse. The majority could be prevented by installing appropriate software and improving staff awareness. There is evidence that such precautions were largely ignored.

Refer to:

- Protecting the Public Purse: Ensuring Probity in Local Government – Update 1997
  Update, 1997, 1862400571, £10
- Ghost in the Machine: An Analysis of IT Fraud and Abuse
  Update, 1998, 1862400563, £15
- Protecting the Public Purse: Ensuring Probity in Local Government – Update 1998
  Update, 1998, 186240125X, £10
- Protecting the Public Purse: Ensuring Probity in Local Government – Update 1999
  Update, 1999, 1862401993, £10

See also:

- Protecting the Public Purse – Probity in the Public Sector: Combating Fraud and Corruption in Local Government
  National Report, 1993, 0118861182, £9
- Opportunity Makes a Thief: An Analysis of Computer Abuse
  National Report, 1994, 0118861379, £8.50
One of the reasons for the introduction of the Computer Misuse Act 1990 was the increase in hacking. The survey found that the problem had continued to grow. The result of such unauthorised access may involve the manipulation of personal records or theft of confidential data, which could be as damaging as fraud. Almost all organisations capture and use personal information, a practice that carries a responsibility to process it in accordance with the law. Individuals and organisations run an increased risk of prosecution where insufficient care and control has been exercised over the processing of such information.

**Key findings**

*Ghost in the Machine*

- The incidence of computer abuse had risen again, now affecting almost one-half of all organisations surveyed.
- Of the 900 organisations surveyed (encompassing local and central government, the NHS, other public sector bodies and middle- and large-scale private sector companies) it was public sector organisations that were being hardest hit. More than one-half of them reported incidents of IT abuse.
- Reported losses were approaching £4 million from just over 500 incidents.
- Existing risks continued to require attention. Virus infections were by far the single most prevalent form of abuse, representing almost one-half of all incidents. Fraud and hacking were next most significant in extent.
- One-half of the incidents detected were found by accident.
- Staff in managerial positions were responsible for almost one-quarter of all computer frauds and for more than one-quarter of specific cases of theft of data or software.
- One-half of the reported cases of hacking were perpetrated by staff misusing their knowledge to gain unauthorised entry to their own organisation’s systems.
- New risks were emerging. Downloading of pornographic material from the internet was a new problem, accounting for nearly one-tenth of incidents of IT abuse.
- Almost all of the survey respondents were making use of the internet but a significant minority of them did not know what additional risks internet activity presented, nor whether their own organisations were secure.
- With telecommunications and IT becoming inextricably linked, there was evidence of a growth in organised telephone fraud.
- Some organisations had responded positively to the challenges, but too few undertook a risk analysis and only one-quarter had an anti-fraud strategy (although this represented a higher proportion compared to previous years).

**Key recommendations**

*Ghost in the Machine*

- Organisations should have an up-to-date security policy that:
  - provides a framework for operations and a benchmark for measuring controls;
  - is known to all staff; and
  - clearly demonstrates commitment from the top.
- Responsibility for security should be clearly defined and assigned to named individuals.
- Organisations should ensure that they restrict access to IT facilities, systems and information.
- Audit and security reviews of all key systems should be undertaken regularly.
- The extent to which internal audit is able to help ensure a sound control environment should be evaluated so that any skill gaps can be bridged.
- An anti-fraud strategy statement should be developed with high-risk business-critical systems clearly identified within it.
People, pay and performance

Background
People, pay and performance

Rate capping and increased central government control over local authority expenditure led to reductions in real terms in local authority expenditure after 1993. This made effective performance management especially important. In 1995 the Commission published two reports and a management handbook looking at aspects of pay, personnel and performance management. The first report, Paying the Piper, concentrated on staff numbers, pay and tiers of management; the second, Calling the Tune, was concerned with benchmarking and performance management systems.

Both reports concentrated on ‘non-manual’ jobs. Subsequently, the distinction between these and ‘manual’ jobs has been abolished in local government, and all staff are now employed on a single set of terms and conditions. As part of this move to single status, authorities have carried out fundamental pay reviews and designed their own new pay structures. This means that the comparisons of non-manual staff numbers and pay changes in the Commission report cannot be directly compared with current systems. Also, the expansion of CCT to white collar services led, in some authorities, to a different mix of in-house and contracted services, making it harder to directly compare staff numbers in the way they were for the original reports. However, the importance of effective performance management systems has not changed.

Recruitment and training
Effective recruitment, good induction and continuous training were identified as important parts of human resource management in the people, pay and performance reports. Recruitment and induction issues were considered in detail in the bulletin On Merit. Audits of recruitment and training were subsequently carried out in local authorities and in 1999 an update was published to report on progress on local authority recruitment and training. Although the bulletin had covered only non-manual staff, the update looked at both manual and non-manual staff – the same principles were found to apply to all staff.

Effective performance management balances devolution and control.
Key findings

People, pay and performance

- Good performance management links an authority’s policy with what its staff actually do by specifying organisational and individual objectives; communicating goals internally and externally; and by monitoring and reviewing outcomes.
- Effective performance management balances devolution and control. Members should set a framework within which officers deliver, but hold them to account for their performance against agreed targets.
- Where staff have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them they can also be more committed to an authority’s policies and goals and are able to derive greater job satisfaction.

Recruitment and training

On Merit (Update, 1999)

- Some authorities still need to improve member and officer training in interviewing skills. All interview panels should include trained individuals.
- Effective selection should include greater use of tests in addition to interviews. Their use for senior, but not junior appointments, increased between 1995 and 1997.
- There should be clear procedures for members and officers to follow. Between 1995 and 1997 the use of both written procedures and selection criteria increased.
- Efficient authorities keep good records. They monitor applications and turnover and review their processes where necessary. Monitoring of recruitment by disability, gender and ethnicity improved significantly between 1995 and 1997 in authorities surveyed; but training is still rarely monitored in this way.

Key recommendations

People, pay and performance

- Authorities should set aims and objectives, both corporately and for each service, linked to available resources, clearly defined action programmes and measurable outputs.
- Human resources, finance, property and information systems should be organised to support the authority’s objectives.
- Targets should be set for the chief executive and chief officers, who should take responsibility for cascading the aims and objectives to all staff.

Recruitment and training

- Authorities need to improve the cost effectiveness of recruitment by: controlling advertisement costs; minimising the time taken to select; and ensuring effective induction to reduce short-term turnover and help new staff understand their jobs as soon as possible.
- Recruitment processes should be planned, measured and evaluated.
- Effective selection methods should be employed, including tests, and good records should be kept of decisions made at short-listing and final interview.
- Advertising practices, costs and effectiveness should be monitored.
- Recruitment decisions and the allocation of training opportunities should be monitored to ensure that there is no unfair or unlawful discrimination.
- Induction should be taken seriously and tailored to different groups of staff including temporary staff.
- With respect to training, authorities should generally follow the principles behind the ‘Investors in People’ scheme, with training plans linked to an authority’s aims and to individual employee needs.
- Training plans should be developed that are linked to corporate and departmental objectives.
Early retirement

Refer to:
Retiring Nature
Early Retirement in Local Government
National Report, 1997, 1862400555, £20
Retiring Nature
A Management Handbook on Early Retirement in Local Government
Retiring Nature Update
Early Retirement in Local Government
Update, 2000, 1862401845, £10

See also:
Calling the Tune
Performance Management in Local Government
National Report, 1995, 0118861344, £9
Paying the Piper. Calling the Tune
People, Pay and Performance in Local Government
Management Handbook, 1995, 0118861387, £30

Background

In 1997 the Audit Commission published its report on the operation of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), *Retiring Nature*. It proved to be a timely contribution to the debate on early retirement in the public sector in England and Wales. It focused on the use of local authorities’ discretionary powers and practices relating to early retirement and ill-health retirement.

In particular the Commission’s report highlighted the negative impact that early retirements had on the funding levels (that is, the ratio of assets to liabilities) of local authority pension funds. The report also noted that employers’ contributions to the funds had increased in recent years, as actuaries determined contribution rates to bring funding levels within the targets set in the individual recovery plans. It argued that the increase in employers’ pension fund contributions meant that a lower level of resources was available for the delivery of services to the public.

*Retiring Nature* also drew attention to the wide variations among different authorities in the number of early- and ill-health retirements. Although ill-health retirements are not strictly a matter for management discretion, the report argued that the disparities in the figures suggested that levels of ill-health retirement were perhaps ‘often a matter of management policy rather than unavoidable incapacity’.

Local authorities were audited after the publication of *Retiring Nature*, and local action plans were agreed with auditors. In 2000, the Commission published an update to *Retiring Nature* based on the findings of the local value-for-money audits and a national survey of local authorities. The survey asked local authorities about the number of retirements in 1997/98 and 1998/99 by type; the size of the workforce (excluding teachers); the number of added years awarded; and any retirements by a chief executive or treasurer.

Four in ten of all retirements were on grounds of ill-health.

The update built on the management handbook’s work on the implications of best value for early retirement in local government. In delivering best value, local authorities will need to conduct wide-ranging consultations with their workforce and local community on a range of resource allocation and utilisation issues, including the overall costs and benefits of early retirement, making the process more open and transparent than in the past.
**Key findings**

*Retiring Nature*

In 1995/96:
- three-quarters of retirements by members of the local government pension scheme were earlier than normal retirement age;
- Four in ten of all retirements were on grounds of ill-health;
- the average additional ‘capitalised’ cost of an early or ill-health retirement was £35,000;
- between 1990/91 and 1995/96: the total extra cost of early retirements in local government was averaging the equivalent of £1 billion a year.

*Retiring Nature (Update, 2000)*

By the time of the update:
- the funding levels of local authority pension funds had, on average, risen, but the majority of funds still had liabilities that exceeded their assets;
- central government had amended the local government pension fund regulations in line with the Commission’s recommendations;
- local government had endeavoured to revise its policies and practices in an effort to reduce the incidence and costs of early retirement;
- two-thirds of all retirements took place before the normal retirement age, compared with three-quarters previously;
- early retirements on the grounds of redundancy or efficiency had declined at a faster rate than ill-health retirements; and
- in the worst performing quarter of authorities, early retirements still accounted for three-quarters of all retirements.

**Key recommendations**

*Retiring Nature*

- Prior to a decision being made, the full cost commitment of an early retirement should be calculated and offset against any savings arising from a post being made redundant.
- The aggregated costs of all the decisions that resulted in an early retirement should be reported annually.
- Council policies should be reviewed to take account of the council’s ability to pay for the costs of early retirement decisions in relation to other calls on resources.
- The costs of early retirements should be borne by the departments making the decisions (except, for example, where a corporate exercise triggered authority-wide redundancies).
- The local authority should ‘compensate’ the pension fund for the costs of early retirements, usually within three years and always in no more than five years.
- Ill-health retirement should take place only within the guidelines of the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisers; and use should be made of qualified occupational health advisers.

*Retiring Nature (Update, 2000)*

- The challenge for local government is to spread the success achieved by some, and to remain vigilant in the face of significant political and organisational change.
- There should be no relaxation of informed decision-making in relation to early retirement.
Improving services

The Government has placed a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards of cost and quality by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to:

- publish annual best value performance plans; and
- review all of their services over a five-year cycle.

Authorities must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value to every review:

- challenging why and how a service is being provided;
- comparing their performance with others (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- consulting with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community; and
- embracing fair competition as a means of securing efficient and effective services.

Authorities must demonstrate to local people that they are achieving continuous improvement in all of their services. Many of the Commission’s past and future value-for-money reports on improving the delivery of frontline services will be helpful to local authorities seeking good practice guidance for conducting best value reviews. This section of the compendium contains entries that deal primarily with frontline service delivery. Individual entries are grouped according to the following sub-sections: Education; Social services; Housing and property management; Environment, planning and economic development; Libraries, arts and museums; Home Office and other services.
School budgets

Schools in England and Wales manage a considerable amount of public money – over £17 billion in 1999/2000. The delegation of budgets to schools was introduced in 1990 as part of local management of schools (LMS) and has generally been heralded as a success. Yet schools vary in how well they manage their budgets and many school staff would like to improve their financial and resource management skills. There have been a number of developments over the last ten years that have increased the importance of schools managing their budgets efficiently and effectively. These include the need to plan and resource improvements in educational effectiveness, attract and manage short-life funding streams to supplement the school’s budget, and, since the recent introduction of ‘Fair Funding’, purchase a set of increasingly complex support services, such as school meals and structural maintenance.

Against this background, and in view of the significant amounts of public money involved, the Audit Commission is currently undertaking a study of school budgets. The study has three main objectives:

- to help schools to improve the management and use of the resources available to them;
- to ascertain what links exist between the management and deployment of resources in schools and pupil performance; and
- to evaluate the effectiveness of current regulatory and funding arrangements.

The study will generate a number of products designed to help staff concerned with financial and resource management issues in schools.

Forthcoming products

For schools:

- A web-based self-assessment tool covering financial management and providing a series of diagnostic questions, guidance notes and good practice examples (due summer 2000).
- An update of the joint Audit Commission/Ofsted financial standards for schools originally set out in Keeping your Balance (due summer 2000).

For all stakeholders:

- A national report detailing the Commission’s findings and recommendations (due autumn 2000).

A local audit of each LEA’s approach to funding, regulation and support of school budgets will be carried out by the Commission’s auditors during 2000 and 2001 to complement these products.
Financial comparisons database
The Commission has recently launched a financial benchmarking database on its schools website. The database allows any school to input its own data and select a group of similar schools, using a range of factors, such as type, size, number of children with special educational needs (SEN) or number eligible for free meals. The database provides expenditure comparisons of:
- teaching costs;
- administrative support staff costs;
- education support staff costs;
- educational supplies;
- building and grounds maintenance costs;
- cleaning and premises staff costs;
- water and energy costs; and
- rents and rates.

The charts show the expenditure per pupil of the schools in the chosen comparator group, with the school’s own expenditure highlighted. Charts can be viewed on the screen or printed for inclusion in a report for governors. Data can also be downloaded in a spreadsheet for further analysis. The database is available to all schools free of charge.

For further information, log on to: www.schools.audit-commission.gov.uk
Education of under-fives

Refer to:
- Counting to Five
  Education of Children Under Five
  National Report, 1996, 011886422X, £10
- Under-Fives Count
  A Management Handbook on the Education of Children under Five
  Management Handbook, 1996, 0118864416, £15
- Counting to Five
  A Review of the Audits of Education for Under-fives
  Update, 1997, 1862400733, £10

See also:
- Getting in on the Act
  Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs
  National Report, 1992, 0118860887, £8.50
- Seen But Not Heard
  Co-ordinating Community Child Health and Social Services for Children in Need
  National Report, 1994, 0118861131, £11
- Seen But Not Heard
  Co-ordinating Community Child Health and Social Services for Children in Need
  Executive Summary, 1994, 0118861255, £7.50
- The Act Moves On
  Progress in Special Educational Needs
  Bulletin, 1994, 0118861409, £5
- Getting in on the Act
  A Review of Progress on Special Educational Needs
  Update, 1998, 1862401217, £5

Background

When the Audit Commission undertook its study in 1995, local authorities were spending £1.4 billion a year on the education and care of children under the age of five. Even though they had no statutory duty to educate under-fives, the number of school places authorities were making available had been increasing. Together with the amount parents were paying for private and voluntary sector provision, the total being spent annually was close to £3 billion.

As provision for under-fives is discretionary, its availability varied widely, both within and between authorities. Meeting demand in an area often depended on initiatives taken by the private and voluntary sectors. Most, but not all, three- and four-year-olds were receiving some care outside their own homes, with at least one-quarter of them in local authority nursery schools and primary school reception classes. However, the number of hours for which they attended varied considerably, as did the quality and cost of the care that they were receiving.

In July 1995 the Government announced changes to its policy on under-fives education. Central to its plans was the nursery voucher scheme that was meant to give all four-year olds an entitlement to part-time education prior to their compulsory start at school three terms later at the age of five. For potential providers to take part in and benefit from the scheme, they would have to organise their activities to ensure they met a nationally set early years curriculum.

To ensure that they did so, a new inspection regime would be introduced, combining existing regulations for standards of daycare with educational standards. In addition, private and voluntary sector providers would have to make the same arrangements for meeting special educational needs for under-fives as maintained schools.

After a year’s piloting and within one month of it being introduced nationwide, the nursery voucher scheme was dropped by the new Government on its election in May 1997. However, the basic entitlement to education for children under five, which the scheme aimed to guarantee, has survived the transition.

New government policy on under-fives education was underpinned by the principle of local partnerships. By February 1998 local authorities had to establish Early Years Partnerships representing a diverse range of interests and providers. These Partnerships then had to draw up Early Years Development Plans setting out how authorities would ensure high quality education would be available for under-fives. By September 1998 they had to guarantee a minimum of five part-time sessions a week for all four year olds. In 1998/99 the Government also introduced the Sure Start programme, putting more money into work with parents and children in deprived areas.
Following publication of the report *Counting to Five* in January 1996, the Commission’s appointed auditors started work on identifying the key issues that each individual local authority faced in providing for under-fives. Despite the changes in government and policy, a review of the audits undertaken (published as an update in November 1997) showed that many of the issues raised in the original report were still current. Authorities needed to continue to focus on identifying and meeting the needs of parents and children. The solution lay in forging partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors to ensure a co-ordinated approach.

**Key findings**

- Costs varied between both the same type and different types of provision, with playgroups, on average, tending to have the lowest cost per hour.
- While nursery classes and schools tended to score highest in inspections, the educational quality of individual settings varied. High standards were shown to be possible in all types of early years service provision, with there being no evidence of a link between quality and cost.
- The key factors affecting costs were levels of occupancy and staff costs, both in terms of pay levels and the meeting of statutory staff:pupil ratios.
- Authorities with extensive nursery provision in schools were less likely to have a formal strategy for under-fives education than those where there were very few nursery places in schools.
- Few authorities had carried out detailed analysis of how existing provision matched needs.
- Authorities tended to focus their planning almost exclusively on ways of increasing the number of places in their own nursery classes.
- Few authorities referred explicitly to the role of parents in their approach to under-fives education, or attempted to canvas parents’ views of services.

**Key recommendations**

- Authorities should establish and maintain Early Years Partnerships that include a wide range of local interests and adequate representation of parents.
- Ways of establishing arrangements for consultation, and improving those that already exist, should be explored.
- Authorities should use their Early Years Development Plans to devise a more strategic approach to planning for under-fives.
- Plans should be reviewed annually and authorities should have in place arrangements for monitoring and evaluating progress.
- Authorities should work with others to provide high-quality cost-effective services and to raise standards in under-fives care and education.
- Early Years Development Plans should set out procedures for identifying under-fives with special educational needs and be explicit about how to meet them.
- Parents should be given access to high-quality information about early years services.
- Authorities should consider how they plan to provide places for three year olds, and extend the range of services for children under three in the long term.
The role of local education authorities

The conceptual thinking emerging from the first phase of research was set out in Changing Partners, published in January 1998. The report explored five key questions:

- what the role of LEAs should be;
- what LEAs need to do to perform their role effectively;
- how LEA performance can be measured and assessed;
- how LEAs should be held accountable; and
- how LEA responsibilities and powers can best be aligned.

The Commission’s research showed that there was already a broad consensus about what the LEA’s role should be. Four main components of the role were identified:

- articulating a vision, with a supporting strategy, for education in the area;
- acting as a vehicle for improvement;
- ensuring equity and an inclusive system of education; and
- managing trade-offs and dealing with tensions and conflict between the interests of schools, pupils, parents and communities.

Changing Partners began the process of evaluating LEAs by setting out a possible model of an effective LEA. Although recognising that there is no single ‘correct’ path to ensure an effective LEA, Changing Partners suggested that the LEAs’ processes and culture are key to its success. At the heart of an effective LEA is a partnership between empowered schools and a proactive LEA. This way of working is complex and requires heavy investment in relationships, effective communication and ‘influencing’. The goal is to achieve a relationship in which each of the partners trusts the motives, actions and judgements of the other.

Held in Trust, published in February 1999, presented the results of the second phase of the Commission’s research into LEAs. It also draws on evidence from the early LEA inspections in England undertaken jointly by the Commission and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Reflecting the changes in policy and legislation that had occurred since the publication of Changing Partners, the focus of the report switched from questions about the role of LEAs to how LEAs can respond most effectively to the new agenda. Taking as its starting point the model of an effective LEA first proposed in Changing Partners, the report set out and measured the performance of a sample of LEAs to explore the issues they face.
Key findings

- Not all LEAs had developed an effective working relationship with their schools, characterised by mutual trust and respect. The proportion of expenditure that LEAs delegated to schools ranged quite widely.
- Advisory services were key to the LEA’s role in school improvement, but not all LEAs monitored their effectiveness.
- Support services to schools varied widely in terms of both their cost and the satisfaction they gave. Moreover schools did not always have a choice over the level or cost of support services provided by the local authority.
- LEA expenditure on special educational needs continued to rise, reducing the funds that could be delegated to schools.
- LEAs varied in their preparedness for the challenges that lay ahead. Held in Trust suggested that the quality of the LEA’s underlying processes of policy and direction, resource management and performance review will be critical to their future success.

Key recommendations

Policy and direction

LEAs should:
- develop a strategic plan that co-ordinates and guides the LEA’s planning process at all levels; and
- develop a comprehensive and effective process of consultation and communication with all stakeholders.

Resource management

LEAs should:
- review resource allocation decisions to ensure that they are driven by educational policies and reflect an appropriate split of responsibilities between LEAs and schools;
- empower schools to purchase the best range of support services possible through the provision of relevant advice, information and service level agreements;
- review the cost-effectiveness of the support services currently provided by the LEA; and
- provide appropriate training and support to schools to prepare them for the extension of delegation.

Performance review

LEAs should:
- develop a comprehensive and accessible database of school performance to assess performance and to track progress;
- compare and calibrate school performance and disseminate comparative information to schools;
- engage with schools in setting targets, challenging and supporting them as necessary;
- direct LEA time and resources in proportion to the needs of each school;
- establish a quality assurance process for monitoring the effectiveness of LEA services, including surveys of client satisfaction;
- develop an LEA performance review cycle that is based on the best value performance framework; and
- measure LEA performance against other similar LEAs.
Managing school places

Refer to:
Trading Places
The Supply and Allocation of School Places
National Report, 1996, 1862400040, £15
Trading Places
A Management Handbook on the Supply and Allocation of School Places

Background
Working within a national framework of legislation, policy and procedure set by central government, local education authorities have to ensure that there are enough school places available for those children whose parents want them to be educated within the state-funded sector. They must also manage the allocation of those places, allowing parents to express a preference and, where possible, seeing that those preferences are met.

In 1996, when Trading Places was published, LEAs faced a complex challenge, being required to reconcile diverse policy objectives and the interests of a range of different players within the ‘market’. But, in many LEAs, the way in which they were managing the supply of school places meant they were not achieving maximum value for money. There was a mismatch between pupils and places. Large primary classes, small schools, small sixth forms and schools in difficulty were all cause for concern. Various factors, once combined, meant that genuine choice was limited for a proportion of parents in both rural and urban areas. A sizeable minority of parents were not receiving satisfaction through the system and appeals against admission decisions for both primary and secondary entrance were increasing.

Poor performance by some LEAs was contributing, at least in part, to a number of problems in their management of admissions and places. LEAs often appeared unwilling to tackle unfilled places. Where problems with admissions existed, the quality of information provided to parents was often inadequate. Few authorities were equipped to deal with the issues regarding the viability of small schools and small sixth forms, or to respond effectively to schools in difficulty. Meanwhile, there was also considerable scope for better working relationships between all those involved in the supply and planning of school places.

Various factors... meant that genuine choice was limited for a proportion of parents in both rural and urban areas.

The Commission report highlighted the impact of varying LEA performance and made recommendations for local action. This advice was expanded in the management handbook, which sets out key issues and good practice case studies in the areas of managing relationships, pupil forecasting, measuring occupancy, removing surplus places, adding capacity, managing admissions and appeals, and managing outcomes.

However, the Commission also concluded that many of the problems were, to some extent, a result of the national framework. Conflicting tensions between government policies were threatening to provoke a system gridlock.

As a result, Trading Places became a major influence on government policy, with many of the identified weaknesses being addressed in the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act.
Key findings

- In 1995 there were nearly 900,000 unfilled school places throughout England, of which up to 40 per cent could be removed.
- One-half of LEAs with the highest level of unfilled places had made no attempt to remove surplus provision within the past three years.
- One school in six was less than three-quarters full, while one-third were filled beyond their physical capacity.
- Nearly one in three English primary school pupils was in a class of more than 30, with only one teacher.
- Only a minority of LEAs ran a fully unified system for administering admissions that covered all local schools.
- Nearly one in five parents surveyed by the Commission did not get a place for their child at their genuine first preference state secondary school.
- Appeals against LEAs’ admissions decisions had risen substantially over the previous three years.

Key recommendations

- LEAs should seek to establish and maintain good relationships with other bodies involved in managing schools.
- LEAs should have in place forecasting arrangements based upon reliable estimates of demand for places and up-to-date records of schools’ capacities.
- LEAs should add new capacity when need dictates, ensuring wherever possible that it accords with local parental preferences and exploring all possible funding sources.
- LEAs should identify scope and appraise options for removing surplus places, concentrating on schools with more than one-quarter of their places unfilled.
- LEAs should pursue strategies aimed at managing demand by providing comprehensive information and advice regarding admission arrangements, co-ordinating the administration of local admissions and controlling the number of appeals.
- Having identified all small schools according to the number on roll, LEAs should decide whether they should be retained, expanded or closed.
- LEAs should review the continued existence of small sixth forms, while encouraging innovative strategies to overcome financial or educational difficulties.
- Comprehensive systems should be put in place to ensure early identification of schools in difficulty so that resources can be targeted to help them, or so that they can be closed.
School attendance and exclusions

Refer to:
Missing Out
LEA Management of School Attendance and Exclusion
National Report, 1999, 1862401934, £20

Background
At the time of the Commission’s report, Missing Out, around 400,000 of the 8 million pupils who should have been at school each day were not there. At least 40,000 were absent without permission, 3,000 were on fixed period exclusions and around 6,000 had been, or were being, permanently excluded. Persistently absent pupils tended to do poorly in examinations, were less likely to secure a good job and more likely to become involved in crime.

Some pupils were receiving alternative, non-school based education from the LEA but, on average, they received only around 8 hours each week, less than one-third of the hours they would have received in school.

Under the 1996 Education Act, parents have the prime responsibility for ensuring that their children receive a suitable education. Schools are responsible for the pupils on their roll and must keep a register twice a day, authorise any absence and decide whether or not to exclude pupils. LEAs may prosecute parents in some cases of non-attendance and ensure alternative education for some pupils not in school.

Permanent exclusions rose in the 1990s until 1997/98 when there was a small drop. Absence rates did not improve over this period. Self-reported truancy among older pupils (via the Youth Cohort Survey) remained high.

Government concerns about poor attendance and exclusions led them to set all LEAs individual targets for improvement in their 1999 Education Development Plans. Overall, the targets represented a reduction in both unauthorised absence and permanent exclusion by one-third by 2002. In addition, the government asked LEAs to move towards providing full-time education for those excluded after 15 days, and to monitor the achievement of those being educated outside school.

The Commission’s report Missing Out was based on a survey of all LEAs in England and Wales concerning their attendance, exclusions and alternative education services, as well as visits to 11 authorities. Four main areas were investigated:

- use of data to inform LEA strategies;
- how LEA services work with partners;
- LEA service management – especially of education welfare services; and
- management of the exclusion process and subsequent placements.
Key findings

• Certain groups of pupils were known to be more at risk of exclusion, and more likely to be poor attendees. Yet often LEAs did not analyse existing data to enable them to understand the causes of exclusion or absence, to target prevention effectively, or to review their provision for such pupils. Two groups particularly at risk were children looked after by the local authority and children with statements of special educational needs.

• Some LEAs were more successful than others at balancing work on individual cases with support for improving the way that schools manage attendance and behaviour issues.

• In some LEAs, links between services, especially education welfare and advice and inspection, were weak or unclear.

• Some of the problems that influence pupil behaviour lie outside of school and education. This makes it important to form effective partnerships with social services, neighbouring LEAs, the police, magistrates and others, such as local child and adolescent mental health services.

• A key LEA service is the education welfare service. The Commission found significant variation across LEAs in terms of caseloads, focus, staffing and monitoring. While attendance is the core function of the service and, at a national level, accounted for the majority of cases dealt with, the importance of other work varies considerably between authorities. Some services were better at monitoring their work than others; while many analyse staff caseloads, only one-half analyse case outcomes.

• LEAs varied in how effectively they attempted to minimise the time permanently excluded pupils spent outside education and the effectiveness of alternative placements provided for them. In four LEAs studied in detail, average time out of education varied between 8 and 18 school weeks. Early planning, clarity of responsibility at all times and regular tracking of individual progress all helped to improve performance.

• All alternatives to mainstream school were found to be more expensive per hour. LEAs were able to afford these options by providing pupils with fewer hours each week. To afford a full-time alternative by 2002, most will need to reduce the numbers involved and improve the speed of pupils’ return to school or to a college course. Monitoring alternatives to school and the success of new school placements was found to be generally weak.

Key recommendations

LEAs should:

• make more effective use of data in service management and planning, including monitoring vulnerable groups and, where necessary, targeting prevention;

• strengthen support for school-level work by providing a strategic framework, working with school management as well as individual pupils, providing expert advice and challenging under-performance;

• work with other services, agencies and local authorities, ensuring clarity on roles and responsibilities, sharing databases locally among staff, and acting as a gateway for schools that require access to other services;

• enhance education welfare service management by reviewing focus, funding and comparative demands on services. They should also monitor service effectiveness and use the information to inform service planning; and

• ensure good quality education for all children outside school by:
  – managing the process of exclusion and tracking all pupils;
  – focusing on all pupils out of school, not only those excluded;
  – monitoring the costs and outcomes of alternative placements; and
  – reviewing services accordingly.
Home-to-school transport

Refer to:
Home-to-School Transport
A System at the Crossroads

Background
Local education authorities are under a duty to provide free transport for, or to pay the travel costs of, a child living outside walking distance from school (defined as more than two miles if the pupil is under eight, or more than three miles if the child is aged eight and over). They also provide free transport for pupils living within these statutory distances if there is no safe walking route to school.

LEAs can also exercise discretion. For example, the Education Act 1988 allowed parents to express preferences over the schools that their children attend. This has increased the proportion of pupils that travel more than the walking distance. LEAs are not obliged to fund free travel in such circumstances, providing that there is another suitable school within the statutory distance. However, some LEAs do provide or arrange free transport for such pupils.

LEAs also make arrangements for pupils aged over 16 who would otherwise be unable to attend school or college.

Clear guidelines should be set out for determining an individual pupil’s entitlement...

LEAs meet their obligations in a variety of ways including providing bus passes (where there is a suitable public transport service) and arranging dedicated home-to-school transport, which may be provided either in-house or by contractors.

The Commission’s report recognised that the legislation had been framed in a context that had since changed dramatically. For example, increased car ownership and road traffic had made some journeys to school on foot more dangerous than they had once been.

Since the Commission’s report, published in 1991, the costs of free home-to-school transport have increased in real terms, due to rising tender prices for bus and coach provision. Pupils with special educational needs represent only a minority of clients receiving free travel, but account for a large proportion of the cost, owing to their need for specialist escorts and vehicles.

As part of its green transport policy the Government has started to encourage alternatives to the car-based ‘school run’, for example, through the Safe Routes to School initiative.

Key findings
• There was wide variation between LEAs in the unit costs of home-to-school transport that could only partially be explained by specific local circumstances.
• LEAs could achieve savings by improving the planning and management of their home-to-school transport service and by reviewing their current policy.

Key recommendations
• LEAs should undertake regular strategic reviews of their policy on home-to-school transport, revisiting their criteria for eligibility and matching overall budget to intended provision.
• Procedures for monitoring the overall effectiveness of LEAs’ home-to-school transport should be established.
• Clear guidelines should be set out for determining an individual pupil’s entitlement to home-to-school transport.
• Route plans used in specifications should be re-assessed to ensure that they result in the most efficient and effective operation of the home-to-school transport service.
Social services

Care for older people

People aged over 75 and especially those aged over 85 are putting enormous pressure on the NHS and social services for long-term care. Both agencies are still contending with the aftermath of changes made during the 1980s to the arrangements for providing care services. The introduction of social security payments to pay for private or voluntary sector residential and nursing home care meant demand soared. At the same time, the provision of home care was failing to keep pace with the growth in population. Although the introduction of community care at the beginning of the 1990s put an end to this trend, it nonetheless had a lasting impact that was neither foreseen nor planned for.

The amount of long-term care provided by the NHS reduced significantly while the amount provided by the independent sector grew rapidly. As a result, health services were less able to discharge older patients in the certainty that they would go on to receive the right level of continuing care. Meanwhile, social services were being squeezed between demands from the NHS on one side and from the independent sector on the other.

The Commission’s report The Coming of Age found that often older people received poorly co-ordinated care because health and social services failed to agree their respective responsibilities. Information about services was often patchy, and providers of care services rarely had sufficient flexibility to be able to tailor services effectively.

The report found that there was too much emphasis on the use of acute beds and care in nursing and residential settings. Consequently it was difficult to resource alternatives that could help to ease the pressure and prevent it building up again. Health and social services were being locked into an increasingly vicious circle, as hospital admissions rose and pressure to free expensive acute beds meant lengths of stay shortened. Both agencies urgently needed to work together on new initiatives to redress the existing imbalance in services and provide other options that gave scope for recovery and rehabilitation.

If they were to secure a wider range of quality services, local authorities would have to actively seek better relationships with independent sector providers. They would need to demonstrate a better understanding of the provider’s vantage point. They needed to work towards developing contracting and funding mechanisms that would achieve a better balance between security for independent care providers and favourable terms for themselves as purchasers of care services. They needed to build into these mechanisms incentives to reward providers for quality and innovation.

Background

More people are living longer. Instead of being considered a great achievement of the twentieth century, longevity is often seen as a problem.

The number of people aged over 85 has nearly doubled since 1981 and will double again by the middle of the century. For people to continue to enjoy quality of life as they grow older, they need to maintain good health and receive the right kind of support when their health is failing. They need active care. This means preventing ill health whenever possible and providing rehabilitation after periods of illness. It requires careful planning and investment to ensure the right resources are in place to promote the well-being of older people.

Refer to:
The Coming of Age
Improving Care Services for Older People

See also:
Home Alone
The Role of Housing in Community Care
Charging with Care
How Councils Charge for Home Care

Health and social services were being locked into an increasingly vicious circle...
The Commission concluded that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of care for older people would also require a national review of policy and funding. It called on central government to clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of the NHS and local authorities for long-term care of older people, together with the level of funding needed to match them. The report discussed the key role that central government had to play in encouraging greater emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation, and on the development of better management skills that would ensure care for older people was appropriate, timely and effective.

Key findings

- At the time of the study, those aged over 65 made up a minority of the population but accounted for nearly one-half of health and social services expenditure.
- Nearly two-thirds of social services gross expenditure on the care of older people was spent on residential and nursing care.
- Since 1983 there had been a steep fall in the number of NHS beds designated for older people while the number of nursing and residential places in the independent sector had more than doubled.
- More older people were being admitted to hospital.
- The average length of stay in geriatric wards fell by almost one-half between 1990 and 1995.
- The quality of the assessment process, which determined whether an elderly person could go home or required care in a residential setting, varied.
- A number of authorities were without guidelines that specified timescales for the various stages of the process. In those that did, standards varied, with the time allowed from assessment to putting a care package into operation ranging from 5 days to 6 months.
- Service reviews to check that care packages were still appropriate were often considered a low priority.

Key recommendations

Local authority social services departments, together with health services where appropriate, should:

- tackle immediate pressures by collating and sharing information on current needs and services;
- thereafter develop information systems to support this mapping process and ensure that information is continuously updated;
- streamline discharge arrangements by agreeing responsibilities and time standards for different stages of the process;
- audit all discharge delays and identify who is responsible;
- review assessment arrangements;
- consider the use of multi-disciplinary panels to monitor placements;
- ensure that older people and their carers are fully informed about, and involved in, the planning of their care;
- consider the use of advocates for older people;
- monitor and review all services regularly to check that care plans are being achieved, high-quality services are being delivered and resources are being targeted effectively; and
- give care managers greater influence over care packages by:
  - reducing restrictions on choice;
  - introducing service level agreements with in-house providers;
  - delegating budgets to teams; and
  - providing information on in-house unit costs.
Mental health services for older people

**Background**

More and more people are living on to old age. Growing numbers of older people mean growing mental health problems. The cost of caring has been estimated to be over £6 billion (1998/99 prices) with half this figure falling to carers and half to health and local authorities.

The Government is giving mental health for older people priority. In England, health and local authorities are required to develop joint investment plans, and in Wales, the National Assembly has stressed the importance of multi-agency planning. The National Service Framework for older people will set out new standards. The NHS Act 1999 provides health agencies and local authorities with the means to establish new financial arrangements with pooled budgets, lead commissioning and integrated services.

The Commission’s report, *Forget Me Not*, on mental health services for older people, identified that health and social care agencies needed to work together to provide:

- help and advice when problems first arise;
- specialist services, especially to people in their own homes;
- co-ordination between agencies and professionals; and
- a comprehensive strategy to ensure all the necessary components are in place.

Support for primary care staff from local mental health professionals was identified as key. At the core of the specialist services is usually the community mental health team (CMHT) with a mix of professionals including psychiatrists, social workers, and community psychiatric nurses (CPNs). The study found that the mix of staff varied widely and that home assessments in some areas were less likely than in others.

People with mental health problems need a range of services: day care and outpatient clinics, residential care and hospital beds. Expenditure on specialist services varied widely, and most was allocated to residential and hospital care rather than care for people at home.

Community-based care takes a variety of forms, including specialist home-care, day hospitals for short-term assessment and treatment, and local authority day centres to cater for people with long-term needs. Respite care is one of the services most often requested by carers to help them continue caring.

Specialist services for people no longer able to stay at home include hospital care, and residential and nursing homes. Areas with highly developed community services were able to admit fewer people to hospital.

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Refer to:
- *Forget Me Not Mental Health Services for Older People*
  
  National Report, 2000, 1862402035, £20

See also:
- *The Coming of Age Improving Care Services for Older People*
  
  National Report, 1997, 1862400598, £20
Such complexity needs to be managed. Good co-ordination between health and local authorities can greatly enhance the quality and effectiveness of services for older people with mental health problems. Community-based teams need access to a range of flexible services, including the practical and therapeutic resources of both agencies. Those that appeared to be most successful contained a mix of professions working from the same office. Assessment should result in a clear understanding of the needs of the individual and a plan for addressing them, co-ordinated by a key worker.

The sharing of information is essential: all of the elements of a comprehensive service described above need to be drawn together at the strategic level and included in joint investment plans in England and health improvement plans in Wales.

**Key findings**

- One-quarter of people aged over 85 were developing dementia and up to one-sixth of those over 65 developed clinical depression.
- Many older people and their carers had to wait for practical help, with one-half of all carers reporting that they had not been told about the help available and how to access it.
- As older people’s conditions become more serious, they need more help. Comprehensive assessments by specialists in people’s own homes were far less likely in some areas than in others.
- Expenditure on specialist services varied widely between different areas. Most came from health agencies and was spent on hospital and residential care, although specialist care in the community was available in a variety of forms. Specialist home care workers were employed in five out of twelve local authorities visited. Day centres in a number of local authorities were looking after people with dementia with a very high level of dependency – indicating that they were being helped to stay at home. Respite care in three out of twelve authorities was provided in people’s own homes.
- Some homes specialise in the care of people with dementia. One-third of people in such homes were admitted from other nursing or residential homes, implying a failure to cope and a need for better support from specialist mental health professionals.
- Overall co-ordination varied. All the health case files in some areas contained information about social care, but, in others, only a minority did.

**Key recommendations**

Local authorities, health authorities and health trusts must work together to provide users and their carers with:

- better advice and information in the early stages;
- a range of specialist help, once it becomes necessary, including assessment by members of a community mental health team (CMHT) in people’s own homes on at least one occasion;
- a range of services favouring home-based support, such as specialist home care workers, day hospitals for time-limited interventions, and day centres for longer-term support, with respite care in a range of settings;
- effective care for those who can no longer cope at home, supported by specialists to ensure quality;
- good co-ordination of the complexity of these arrangements, with integrated teams of professionals able to access a range of flexible services, effective care planning and information sharing; and
- all elements of a comprehensive service drawn together at a strategic level through the joint investment plan and health improvement programme.
Child and adolescent mental health services

**Background**

Over the past 20 years the importance of the mental health of children and adolescents has been increasingly recognised. Strong links have been established between mental health problems in children and young people and issues of public concern, such as juvenile crime, alcohol and drug misuse, self-harm and eating disorders. There is also strong evidence that a significant number of problems in childhood, if not adequately treated, lead to lifelong mental illness. Recent studies agree that about one in five children and adolescents suffer from a wide range of mental health problems, and that this proportion has increased in industrialised countries since the end of the Second World War.

Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are provided not only by the NHS but also by local authority social services, education, youth justice and other departments, voluntary organisations and the independent sector. They range from general primary care services to highly specialised services, which may not be located in every district in the country.

At the time of the Commission’s report, *Children in Mind*, the audits of both health authority commissioners and specialist CAMHS providers indicated that about £150 million was being spent on specialist CAMHS in England and Wales each year. Specialist CAMHS were provided in about 160 NHS trusts across England and Wales; but these usually accounted for only a small proportion of these trusts’ overall activity. But the NHS is not the only employer of mental health professionals. For example, local authority social services departments often also employed significant numbers. Two in five social services departments responding to an Audit Commission questionnaire employed such staff, often psychologists. The majority of these staff provided support and therapy for children and young people who had been abused. Others provided training for residential care workers and foster carers.

The policy agenda for addressing the mental health problems of children and young people has been developing rapidly in the NHS and in local authorities. In 1999, the Department of Health announced an extra £84 million for the development of child and adolescent mental health services, spread over three years. In Wales, a multi-disciplinary advisory group has been established to draw up an all Wales strategy for CAMHS. Much work has been done on establishing and disseminating good practice guidelines for the different agencies involved.

*Recent studies agree that about one in five children and adolescents suffer mental health problems...*

The Commission’s report, *Children in Mind*, was a report on the progress of the implementation of these changes. While the majority of the research for the report was carried out in health authorities and NHS trusts, the report discusses the essential role of local authority services in the planning and delivery co-ordination of CAMHS.
Key findings

- Children seen by the NHS specialist services tended to have complex problems. Four in five had identifiable risk factors in their history. Boys outnumbered girls overall, although, from mid-teens, girls outnumbered boys.
- The response of health authorities and trusts was variable. Expenditure per child varied by a ratio of 7:1 and trusts varied substantially in the mix of staff that they employed, suggesting that some trusts did not have access to the full range of skills needed by contemporary standards.
- Links between CAMHS and other agencies needed strengthening in needs assessment, planning and delivery. For example, weaknesses were identified in the use of local authority data (such as school exclusions, statements of special educational need and temporary housing) to assess need for services.
- Access to CAMHS could be restricted. A majority of referrals were from other clinicians, while only a small proportion were from social services or education. Two-thirds of youth justice managers reported problems gaining access to CAMHS.

Key recommendations

Health authorities and local authorities should work with others, including the voluntary sector, to:

- develop the commissioning of services for promoting children's mental health, preventing problems, and identifying and tackling problems quickly;
- specify ways to co-ordinate the implementation of policies in education (e.g. behaviour support planning), social services (under Quality Protects) and youth justice;
- ensure that any move of commissioning of CAMHS from health authorities to Primary Care Groups (PCGs) does not result in the loss of joint commissioning expertise built up;
- commission and specify jointly with other agencies suitable provision for groups of young people requiring intensive assessment and treatment, and particular types of approach and facilities; and
- consider whether there would be value in pooling budgets under the Partnership in Action initiative.

The report also contains additional specific recommendations for health authorities.

Two-thirds of youth justice managers reported problems gaining access to CAMHS.
Joint Reviews of local authorities’ social services

**Background**

Social services make an important contribution to enabling communities to prosper and care better for their fellow citizens. One hundred and fifty local authorities are managing a growing and complex business on behalf of local citizens. Social services expenditure accounts for about one-fifth of an average council’s budget, and around three-quarters of a million people work in social care in England and Wales.

Over the last 10 years, central government legislation has given local authorities increasing responsibilities in areas such as child protection and community care. The recent Social Services White Paper has set a challenging agenda for modernising social care: ensuring that people are protected; that independence is promoted wherever possible; that standards are clear; and that quality is monitored.

The Department of Health’s Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) evaluates the effectiveness of services in order to help Government to frame policy, local authorities to improve services and staff to follow best practice. The Performance Assessment Framework and best value regime give SSI a central role in improving the performance of local social services. The Audit Commission promotes the best use of public money in social services by commissioning audits, publishing studies on value for money and carrying out best value inspections.

Joint Reviews, set up under the Audit Commission (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1996, combine these approaches to look at the overall performance of each local social services authority. The Review Team is jointly managed by the Audit Commission’s Inspection Directorate, the Department of Health’s Social Services Inspectorate and the Social Services Inspectorate (Wales). Reviews aim to improve social services by identifying and promoting policies, management approaches and practices that achieve better outcomes and better value.

Reviews start from the experience of people who use social services, then analyse the practice and management of the authorities delivering those services and assess whether they represent value for money. Their foundation is the understanding that local people will get a good deal from their social services only when:

- authorities fit services to people rather than slot people into services;
- councils can learn what works well and reshape their services to meet needs better;
- social services departments have clear standards and make sure that they are met; and
- every pound spent is directed at a specific purpose, and costs are kept under constant scrutiny.

Refer to:

- Reviewing Social Services
- Guiding you Through
- Messages for Managers
  - Learning the Lessons from Joint Reviews of Social Services
- Making Connections
  - Learning the Lessons from Joint Reviews 1998/99
    - Annual Summary, 1999, 1862401861, £15
- Getting the Best from Children’s Services
  - Findings from Joint Reviews of Social Services 1998/99
    - National Report, 1999, 1862401616, £20
- People need People
  - Releasing the Potential of People Working in Social Services
    - National Report, 2000, 1862401302, £20

See also:

- Getting the Best from Social Services
- Learning the Lessons from Joint Reviews
  - Annual Report, 1998, 1862401101, £15

Individual Joint Reviews are available on request, priced £15, from Joint Reviews (Tel: 020 7630 0105)
Joint Reviews publishes a report on the findings and recommendations resulting from each review. In addition, annual reports are published summarising the findings of all the reviews undertaken in the year. A number of other publications designed to help social services managers have also been produced.

*Reviewing Social Services* describes the review methodology and gives an overview of reviews carried out. A practical handbook, *Messages for Managers*, which explores lessons from Joint Reviews of social services, provides a more detailed framework for councils to work within and can assist in rationalising working practices.

Two thematic reports have also been published, one drawing together the lessons about children’s services, *Getting the Best from Children’s Services*, the other, *People need People*, examines human resource management.

### Key findings and recommendations

#### Making Connections

The team’s third annual report summarises the findings and conclusions of the Joint Reviews completed during 1998/99. This consolidates key messages from earlier years. The report includes summaries of individual local reports published during the previous year, and identifies common issues against the Joint Review methodology and framework.

The report identifies attributes of councils that are doing well. The changing and challenging context for social services is examined.

Councils need to:

- be better informed;
- have real working partnerships built on trust with other services;
- make sure that standards are citizen based; and
- increase their capacity to improve by strengthening service management.

#### Getting the Best from Children’s Services

This report draws on review findings and assesses how prepared councils are to meet the challenge of transforming children’s services. It reports on the lessons that have been learnt and how they can help councils to achieve improvements. The report sets these lessons in the context of the objectives and priorities of the Quality Protects/Children First programmes.

The overriding message from reviews is that councils can deliver real improvements when they manage the whole system of childcare – concentrating on the connections between services as much as the performance of individual services. For councils to be ‘better parents’ they need to organise themselves better.

#### People need People

This report reviews human resource management in social services departments. It is based on fieldwork carried out during six reviews of local councils, an analysis of the first 42 Joint Reviews and consultation with major stakeholders.

The report concludes that those councils that are doing best in service delivery and management are also those who score highly on the management of their staff. While good practice was identified in many services, there is significant room for improvement.

All councils need to re-evaluate their culture and approach to staff: successful social services agencies are those that are open, self-critical, listen to users, carers and frontline staff, and involve them in setting and monitoring objectives. The recommendations are consistent with the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS) training strategy, Investors in People (IIP) standards and other external benchmarks.
Housing and property management

Local authority housing strategies

Refer to:
- Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
  National Report, 1992, 0118860739, £12
- Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
  A Review of Progress in Housing Management
  Update, 1998, 1862401268, £5

See also:
- Competing for Attention
  Identifying and Selecting Sites for Housing Associations’ New-build Development
  National Report, AC/HC, 1998, 1841110078, £10
- Stock in Trade
  Good Practice in Business Planning Stock Transfers

Background
Although Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) have become increasingly important in providing new housing, local authorities in England and Wales still own over 3.5 million dwellings, and spend over £4 billion on their management and maintenance. Local authorities also have a strong influence on the building of new RSL dwellings. They can provide resources to support specific RSL schemes in the form of land or cash, often in return for the right to nominate people from their waiting list to RSL tenancies.

The Audit Commission’s national report, Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies, recommended that authorities work with other social housing providers in their areas to assess local needs and resources, and plan for the future. The report identified ways in which local authority housing departments could make better use of local resources in three key areas, by:
- fully utilising all the social housing in their areas, including that provided by RSLs;
- having efficient rent collection procedures; and
- maintaining the housing stock in good condition.

After 1992, the differences in the circumstances of authorities widened. The Commission’s 1998 update found that many areas, particularly in the north of England, now faced a surplus of social housing stock, and did not need all of their RSL nominations. Increasing numbers of authorities had transferred their housing stock to RSLs as a means of meeting acute repair backlogs and providing greater certainty to tenants about rents.
Other major changes that have influenced local authority housing strategies include:

- the ‘right to manage’ for local authority tenants, introduced in 1994;
- regeneration initiatives such as the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities and the growth in public-private partnerships;
- increased responsibilities in respect of asylum seekers introduced by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and
- changes to local authorities’ responsibilities to the homeless introduced by the Housing Act 1996.

These issues take on greater significance with the suggestions in the recent Housing Green Paper that local authorities will increasingly focus on their strategic housing role, with an acceleration of stock transfers to the RSL sector.

**Key findings**
Between 1992 and 1997 there was:
- a fall in the number of tenants with significant rent arrears;
- more write-off of uncollectable arrears;
- better knowledge in authorities of the condition of their housing stock;
- increased spending on repairs of all classes, including capital works; and
- closer collaboration between authorities and RSLs.

In metropolitan authorities:
- it was taking longer to find new tenants for empty dwellings;
- the number of long-term empty dwellings had increased; and
- there was a growing loss of rental income, as a result of empty properties.

In London:
- it still took a long time to relet dwellings, although performance had improved; and
- management costs had risen.

**Key recommendations**
All authorities need to:
- review their progress and performance with their auditors, who can provide comparative information; and
- identify areas where action needs to be taken – typically, for a metropolitan authority:
  - difficult to let properties;
  - long-term empty dwellings;
  - rising stock turnover; and
  - low Housing Association nominations.

And, for a London borough:
- high rent arrears;
- long relet times;
- rising management costs; and
- developing an action plan.

The update also recommended further national research to assess the impact of the changing problems facing housing authorities, as well as the growing regional differences.
Housing and community care

**Background**

Housing is a vital component of care in the community. At the time of the Commission’s report on this subject more than £2 billion was being spent annually providing housing-related community care services to about 1.3 million tenants and owner-occupiers.

The policy of caring for vulnerable people in the community, and, where possible, in their own homes, rather than in institutions has been developing over the last thirty years. As far back as 1986 the Audit Commission was arguing that to make a reality of community care a ‘seamless’ provision of services was needed. In its 1997 national report, *The Coming of Age*, the Commission highlighted the need to rationalise the way that older people are cared for in their homes and within the community. Too little attention was being paid to the significance of the housing role and its contribution to community care.

Housing agencies co-ordinate with social services, health bodies, the voluntary sector and others to identify current and future social housing needs. Together, they are striving to provide integrated care for frail older people, people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities and those with mental health problems. Housing agencies provide vulnerable clients with practical support, such as advising on rent payments and benefit claims, and the adaptation of properties, to enable those who could not otherwise live independently to do so. At the time of the Commission’s *Home Alone* report on housing and community care 25,000 homes a year were being adapted.

*Home Alone* found that authorities were struggling to cope with demand. With people living longer there were more elderly people needing support to stay in their own homes. Yet the social housing stock had shrunk by over a million dwellings since the beginning of the 1980s. Many of the better homes had been sold and the quality of the social housing that remained was poor in some areas.

Increasing numbers of people with mental health problems were being housed in the community. There were 110,000 fewer psychiatric beds than forty years earlier. The needs of many vulnerable older people were not being met. This was, in part, due to the failure of authorities to adjust their provision of sheltered housing from a traditional basis to one that took account of changing needs and demands.

The Commission found evidence to suggest that some of the problems could be solved at local level. There was scope for improved joint working between housing, social services and health bodies. Effective working relationships could be achieved with practical arrangements in place, such as regular, formal liaison; joint training; protocols for day-to-day collaboration and information sharing. Authorities needed to be more responsive to local needs and make more flexible use of specialised housing, for example, converting vacant sheltered units into housing for the young homeless.

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Refer to:
- *The Coming of Age*
- *Improving Care Services for Older People*
  
  National Report, 1997, 1862400598, £20
- *Home Alone*
  

See also:
- *A Measure of Support*
  
  Good Practice in Managing Supported Housing
  
- *Charging with Care*
- *How Councils Charge for Home Care*
  
  National Report, 2000, 1862402221, £20
However, action was also needed from central government. Policy guidance from the lead government departments needed to be better co-ordinated. There needed to be tighter regulation of the quality and consistency of housing and related community care services. The funding framework needed to be revised in order to promote the best use of resources. Perverse incentives to opt for institutional rather than community care needed to be removed from the existing funding regime. Instead the funding framework needed to allow for the funding of preventative, low-cost support as an investment in early intervention.

The Commission concluded that the remedies for the current deficiencies in housing and community care services lay in building effective partnerships at national and local levels.

**Key findings**

- Some authorities did not keep comprehensive records of individuals’ needs or of what was available to meet their needs.
- Much social housing stock was unsuitable for vulnerable people.
- Some routine adaptations for frail older people or people with physical disabilities were taking up to two years, in the meantime causing distress and incurring additional costs.
- Special needs accommodation was not always located where the needs were greatest.
- The funding regime tied too much support to properties rather than to their vulnerable residents, leading to mismatches with need.
- Too many resources were being consumed by crisis management rather than being put into effective prevention. Without basic support to ensure everyday tasks were manageable, vulnerable people were falling into difficulty. This could be followed by hospitalisation, then delays before discharge and resettlement, only for the ‘revolving door’ syndrome to resume and for some people to drop out of the system altogether.
- There was no framework of standards for sheltered and supported housing that ensured vulnerable people were protected.

**Key recommendations**

Authorities, together with other local agencies, should:

- set out a shared vision and agree objectives for housing and community care;
- collate information on needs and resources to provide a proper basis for strategic decision-making;
- ensure that strategies are in place to address issues such as:
  - the need for current and future housing and support services;
  - the efficiency and effectiveness of current arrangements; and
  - the best use of resources across agencies;
- promote the use of performance measures to evaluate cost effectiveness and quality;
- review mainstream housing services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of vulnerable people, by:
  - making appropriate use of non-council tenures;
  - improving housing allocation processes; and
  - providing pre-tenancy support, resettlement and ongoing support; and
- monitor the time taken to process adaptations, identify the reasons for any delays and address them.
Social housing development

Refer to:
Competing for Attention
Identifying and Selecting Sites for Housing Associations’ New-build Development
National Report, ACHYC, 1998, 1841100078, £10

See also:
Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
National Report, 1992, 0178860739, £12

Within Site
Assessing Value for Money in Housing Associations’ New-build Programmes
National Report, ACHYC, 1996, 0901454834, £10

To Build or Not to Build
Assessing Value for Money in Housing Association Rehabilitation Programmes
National Report, ACHYC, 1998, 0901454583, £10

Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
A Review of Progress in Housing Management
Update, 1998, 1862401268, £5

Background
The role of the Audit Commission in carrying out studies to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) was established under the Housing Act 1996. Local authority housing and planning strategies have a significant impact on most RSLs’ business. The Commission’s joint reports with the Housing Corporation have, therefore, included appraisal of relevant local authority activity and recommendations for action by local authorities.

Competing for Attention was the last of three joint reports with the Housing Corporation that studied the process of developing new RSL homes. Its primary focus was the way in which sites for development are selected and funded.

Local authorities gave preference to schemes in targeted regeneration areas.

Corporation and local authorities to distribute the shrinking pot more wisely was placed in sharper focus. In many areas RSLs also faced a shortage of land. Research commissioned by the Corporation in 1995 showed a diminishing supply of local authority land, traditionally the primary source of RSL development sites.

Since Competing for Attention was published the Corporation has changed the formula for distributing the ADP. It is now more closely linked with assessments of local need, that are based on robust housing needs surveys together with other market research.

These issues take on greater significance with the suggestions in the recent Housing Green Paper that local authorities will increasingly focus on their strategic housing role, with an acceleration of stock transfers to the RSL sector.
Key findings (relevant to local authority strategies)

- Local authorities were more likely than private developers to honour an agreement to sell land to an RSL.
- Some authorities earmarked all their surplus housing land, and some education land, for social housing development. Others gave it less priority.
- The majority of local authority sites were sold to RSLs at discounted value.
- Some councils did not carry out comprehensive assessments of housing need across their areas. However, some county councils and districts worked together to carry out combined county-wide surveys.
- The extent to which local authorities acted corporately to co-ordinate the planning and provision of affordable homes was variable.
- RSLs paid high regard to local authority priorities when assessing the development potential of sites.
- Although most local authorities encouraged competition between RSLs for development opportunities, the majority of sites were secured without competition. Some had formal assessments to choose their business partners; others were less structured.
- Local authorities gave preference to schemes in targeted regeneration areas. As these areas were often unpopular with local people, RSLs experienced letting problems.

Key recommendations (for local authorities)

Local authorities should:

- adopt a corporate approach to the assessment of housing needs, the identification of development sites and the disposal of council-owned land;
- carry out comprehensive land availability studies at regular intervals, involving representatives of the private sector, housing corporation and RSLs;
- make fuller use of powers to dispose of land to RSLs at below market value;
- make regular use of competitive procedures for all medium-to-large sites;
- ensure that competition enhances value for money through:
  - being clear and consistent about the rules of competition and the rights of entry;
  - ensuring that the procedures for bidders and competition organisers are time and cost efficient;
- promoting a positive image of competition that does not inhibit co-operation and partnership between RSLs; and
- avoid, where possible, the concentration of resources into one or two priority projects; and instead recognise the benefits of providing small clusters of social housing in non-estate locations to promote a balanced tenure mix in local communities.
Business planning for stock transfers

Refer to:
Stock in Trade
Good Practice in Business Planning Stock Transfers

See also:
Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
National Report, 1992, 0118860739, £12
Developing Local Authority Housing Strategies
A Review of Progress in Housing Management
Update, 1998, 1862401268, £5

Background
The role of the Audit Commission in carrying out studies to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) was established under the Housing Act 1996. Local authority housing and planning strategies have a significant impact on most RSLs’ business. The Commission’s reports have therefore included appraisal of relevant local authority activity and recommendations for action by local authorities.

Between 1988, when large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of local authority housing was introduced, and April 2000, nearly 500,000 local authority homes were transferred to new landlords. The majority of these homes were in rural or suburban districts where values were high and stock disposal generated substantial capital receipts.

The Commission’s report, Stock in Trade, found that since the introduction of capital subsidy towards the costs of repair and improvement – through the Estates Renewal Challenge Fund (ERCF) in 1995 – the number of partial stock transfers had increased. This had enabled local authorities to target priority estates, or groups of estates, for transfer. These estates usually required considerable investment to tackle decades of under-investment in maintenance and refurbishment, and their market value was, therefore, lower than the projected cost of the investment. This type of transfer involved the payment of a grant or ‘dowry’ to the receiving RSL to cover the shortfall.

Although the ERCF has now been abolished, the Government is piloting a new estate regeneration programme, New Deal for Communities, which may involve the transfer of targeted stock in the most deprived areas, in addition to cash for stock improvement and neighbourhood services, and subsidies for employability schemes. Value-for-money considerations suggest that transfer is likely to be the best route for housing investment in these areas, but residents will ultimately make that decision.

The main purpose of transfer to RSLs is to attract capital investment to repair and improve deteriorating housing estates, because, as independent private sector bodies, RSLs are not subject to the same borrowing restrictions as local authorities, and are, therefore, able to attract private investment. Transfer programmes, and the amount of subsidy, are agreed annually by the DETR.

All local authorities must consider what role transfer can play in their housing strategy. At the centre of the process are the tenants whose homes are acquiring new owners – they must be formally consulted and balloted.
At the centre of the process are the tenants whose homes are acquiring new owners...

The transfer process is complex and relies heavily upon robust business plans. The business plan demonstrates compliance with DETR and Housing Corporation rules and is a core part of the prospectus to secure private sector funding. It should set out the new landlord’s strategic direction and the promises that have been made to tenants.

In the case of whole stock transfers, most staff at the new RSL will formerly have worked in the local authority’s housing department. Effective business planning is particularly crucial for these new organisations that have no track record as businesses and no existing business plans to build upon.

These issues take on greater significance with the suggestions in the recent Housing Green Paper that local authorities will increasingly focus on their strategic housing role, with an acceleration of stock transfers to the RSL sector.

Key findings
- Local authorities and RSLs relied too heavily on consultants to develop the financial projections for stock transfers.
- Authorities were frequently unable to provide adequate data about the stock. This data was needed for business planning.
- Poor project planning of the transfer process as a whole squeezed the time and resources available for considered business planning.
- The level of tenant involvement in business planning was variable, although there was evidence that tenant input could improve the accuracy of projections (for example, tenant turnover and void rates).
- New RSL boards often failed to take early ownership of the business plan or appreciate the risks of not delivering projects and services within the agreed framework.

Key recommendations
DETR should:
- require that applications for places on the disposals programme include a project plan covering the whole transfer process, and that the plan is copied to the Corporation;
- amend transfer guidance to emphasise that local authorities should consult the Corporation as part of their options appraisal;
- consider alternatives to the annual programme, such as a rolling programme, in order to reduce pressure on funding and registration timetables and give more time for considered business planning;
- consider requiring all transfers to be open to competing bidders, including any in-house bid;
- ensure that requirements concerning pre-transfer works are rigorously enforced; and
- produce indicators for monitoring the effects of transfer (e.g. value for money, quality of service, tenant involvement, socio-economic improvements).

The report also included a series of procedural recommendations for the Housing Corporation.
Environment, planning and economic development

Environmental stewardship

Refer to:
- It’s a Small World
  Local Government’s Role as a Steward of the Environment
  National Report, 1997, 1862400296, £20
- Waste Matters
  Good Practice in Waste Management
- It’s a Small World
  A Review of Progress in Environmental Stewardship
  Update, 1999, 1862401853, £5

Background

The United Nations (UN) Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 highlighted how environmental problems and their solutions are intrinsically linked to issues of poverty, health, trade, debt, consumption and population.

As a response to the agenda for the 21st century agreed at the summit, national organisations representing local government came together to set Local Agenda 21 (LA21). This gave councils a framework to help them to establish sustainable policies and practices for all of their activities, with the aim of balancing economic development with responsibility for the environment.

Although sustainable development cannot be seen as the responsibility of a single department or public sector agency, councils are well placed to initiate and implement effective local environmental programmes, firstly, by involving the wider community in setting priorities, and then by organising themselves effectively so as to achieve these ends.

By working with their communities, forging partnerships with other tiers of government and putting their own house in order, environmentally sensitive councils can establish their credibility as advocates within their communities and help to influence public attitudes. The improvements that councils can achieve by reducing the environmental impact of their own activities may prove to be small, but by providing community leadership and by educating and influencing individual behaviours, their impact could be very substantial indeed.

In 1997 the Audit Commission published It’s a Small World, which examined the role of local government in environmental issues, focusing attention on the critical link councils represent in the chain between global and local. A companion good practice guide was published in the same year, offering more detailed, practical advice on local authority waste management.

The Commission published an update two years later to look at the changes that had taken place since the local value-for-money audits that had followed the publication of the original report. Mirroring the recommendations made in It’s a Small World, the follow-up work concentrated on authorities’ strategic response to the LA21 initiative and on whether they were actually delivering measurable improvements in their administration of those activities that have a direct environmental impact, such as waste management, energy use and water conservation.
Key findings

- Expenditure relating to environmental stewardship across council services represents a substantial area of local government expenditure. Annual expenditure on such functions, from waste management and pollution control, to planning and building regulations, totalled nearly £5 billion in 1995/96.

- In 1994/95 only one in five authorities had an LA21 strategy in place, but this had risen to two-thirds of authorities by 1997/98. Moreover, when tested against a good practice checklist, the average quality score of those strategies had more than doubled, although there is still much room for improvement.

- The original report, It’s a Small World, recommended that authorities base their waste management policies on the ‘waste hierarchy’, which tracks the use of materials from their creation to their disposal. The update found that waste reduction, in the form of home composting, and all forms of recycling, had increased. However, the amount of household waste collected for disposal also continued to increase.

- Despite this increase, the amount of waste disposed of in non-environmentally friendly ways – landfill in the main – did not change significantly. And, although the cost of waste disposal rose in real terms, this mainly reflected the imposition of landfill taxes in October 1996.

- The original study observed that schools seemed reluctant to invest in energy conservation, although they could make savings by doing so. By the time of the follow-up, data showed that energy use in schools had fallen to some extent. In contrast, energy use in council offices showed no significant change, and there was substantial variation in such energy use, even when the age of the building and the presence of air-conditioning were taken into account.

- Under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, authorities are charged with bringing about significant improvements in the energy efficiency of their housing. It’s a Small World suggested that authorities could make a substantial impact on energy use in local dwellings, both directly, by improving their own housing stock, and indirectly, through targeted funding and subsidies to improve energy efficiency in private housing. By the time of the update, the proportion of authorities that had assessed the energy efficiency of some or all of their local housing stock had risen significantly, and authorities were spending more on the stock that they owned.

- It’s a Small World reported that water consumption in schools, leisure centres and other council facilities was costing in excess of £100 million per year. Meanwhile water was being lost through leaking pipes, overflowing tanks, running taps, continuously flushing urinals and poor maintenance of swimming pools. By the time of the update, water use in schools in particular had fallen, although still over one-half of schools did not meet the best practice benchmark.

- Pollution control became an issue for local authorities following the original study, as the Government committed itself, through the National Air Quality Strategy, to ensuring consistently good air quality throughout the country by 2005. The update found that the proportion of local authorities that had bought or converted any or all of their vehicle fleet to run on low pollution fuels had substantially risen between 1994/95 and 1997/98.
Key recommendations

- Local authorities need to ensure that they have adopted a strategic approach to environmental issues for all their activities, throughout all departments.

- Establishing partnerships with other public services, the voluntary sector and local businesses will be the most effective way for authorities to raise public awareness of environmental issues and identify and implement good practice.

- Authorities should make optimum use of their regulatory powers to monitor and enforce good practice.

- Authorities’ waste management policies should be based upon the ‘waste hierarchy’. This demands that authorities seek firstly to reduce the amount of waste generated, then maximise re-use and recycling, and lastly dispose of the remainder in ways that are as environmentally friendly as possible. Authorities should seek to contain the costs of all these operations.

- Schools and other council buildings and facilities should be surveyed for energy efficiency and checked for water leaks, and appropriate action taken where energy and/or water use breaches the best practice triggers.

- Substantial energy savings can be made through alterations to both publicly and privately owned dwellings. To maximise such savings authorities should survey the energy efficiency of all local dwellings, increase the priority given to energy conservation expenditure and implement those measures that provide the best rate of return on energy conservation investment.

- Authorities should review their transport policies to ensure that greater emphasis is placed on managing demand than on managing traffic.

- In seeking to implement the National Air Quality Strategy authorities should not only monitor air quality and inform and educate the public, but act as a community leader by purchasing/converting their vehicle fleets to run on low pollution fuels and encouraging their contractors and other partners to do likewise.
Development control

Refer to:
Building in Quality
A Review of Progress on Development Control
Update, 1998, 1862401209, £5

See also:
Building in Quality
A Study of Development Control
National Report, 1992 (out of print)

Background
Local authorities’ development control responsibilities seek to mediate the conflicts between applicants, residents and the local economy, with an eye on the effects decisions would have for future generations.

Development control was set up under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, with the central precept that development had to have planning permission. Local planning authorities (LPAs) were given enforcement powers to deal with any contraventions. The 1947 Act was later overtaken by the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which was then complemented in 1991 by the Planning and Compensation Act, which required mandatory unitary development plans and district-wide local plans. The 1990 Act strengthened the enforcement powers of LPAs.

In 1992, the Audit Commission published the report Building in Quality. The net cost, after fees, of development control services in England and Wales was estimated at £85 million. The number of applications received by LPAs had hit record levels in 1988. By 1992 they were still well above 1985 levels. The Commission study developed some of the ideas in the earlier Department of Environment (DoE) publication Local Planning: The Development Control Function (1983), but was also prompted, in part, by a recommendation in the White Paper, This Common Inheritance (1990).

The 1983 DoE report concentrated on the ‘efficiency and economy with which resources allocated to development control are used to process planning applications’, but stressed that ‘no attempt was made to form specific conclusions with regard to the quality or effectiveness of development control’. Building in Quality attempted to fill that gap. The report highlighted concern that LPAs discharge their responsibilities in a way that ensured they delivered a quality service and brought about quality outcomes.

There had been a measurable improvement in the speed of processing applications over that period...

In 1998 the Commission undertook a follow-up review of Building in Quality to establish the changes that had occurred in aspects of the service since 1992. The focus was on tracking progress in performance from the 1992 baseline data.

Sustainability is now the major influence in the approach to future development and has become a basic requirement of the development plan process, and in doing so influences the approach to development control. Government guidance in PPGs (Planning Policy Guidance) and elsewhere, has increasingly focused on issues such as energy and pollution, confirming their relevance to the planning system and requiring those in development control to balance an increasingly wider range of issues in dealing with proposals for development.

The other area of major change has been the increased emphasis on propriety and exercising proper standards of public behaviour in the development control service. Nolan made specific recommendations in this area and, as councils move towards cabinet government, this issue will continue to require careful consideration.
Key findings

*Building in Quality* (1992)
- High caseloads were not found to be a barrier to speedy decision-making.
- Caseloads per officer varied widely.
- The majority of committee decisions exceeded 40 working days.

*Building in Quality* (1998)
- The number of planning applications dealt with by LPAs had shown a small, but steady, fall since 1991/92 (although there has since been an upturn).
- There had been a measurable improvement in the speed of processing applications over that period, particularly in the London boroughs.
- There had been small but significant improvements in the time LPAs took to register applications and issue decision notices.
- In 1992, increased delegation of decisions to officers was recommended for a more efficient and effective service. The 1998 survey showed average delegation levels had increased, with significant numbers exceeding the Audit Commission’s recommended target.

Key recommendations

*Building in Quality* (1992)
- Authorities should set objectives for development control, balancing development objectives with quality service delivery and customer care. They should also monitor performance against these objectives.
- Authorities should make explicit who their customers are, the role customers have in the planning process and the options available to them.
- Authorities should regularly review the outcomes of their decisions in order to ascertain the quality of their decision-making process and the impact on the local environment.
- Systematic checks should be made on the quality of officers’ appraisal and processing of applications.

*Building in Quality* (1998)
- Authorities should be clear about who they consult, why and by what method, and should assess the benefits of such consultations.
- Procedures should be established to ensure a swift and consistent decision-making process, with delegation to officers wherever possible.

The recommendations of the original report remain relevant: while the update recognised that ‘there have been important improvements’, it went on to state that ‘there is still a wide variation in performance, and scope for many authorities to improve before they match the standards of the best’.

The update made the following additional recommendation:
- Authorities should review progress and performance, and take action to meet the government target of processing 80 per cent of applications within 8 weeks.
Economic development and regeneration

Refer to:
A Life’s Work
Local Authorities, Economic Development and Economic Regeneration
National Report, 1999, 1862401837, £20

See also:
Urban Regeneration and Economic Development
The Local Government Dimension
National Report, 1989, 0117014516, £5

Background
In 1989 the Commission published its first report on economic regeneration, Urban Regeneration and Economic Development. Though the picture it presented had changed – for example, in the nature of the agencies and funding schemes – many of its findings were echoed ten years later in the Commission’s report, A Life’s Work. In particular, the ‘patchwork quilt of complexity and idiosyncrasy’ with respect to Government funding programmes mentioned in the original report, and shortcomings in local authorities’ strategic planning and partnership working, were still causes for concern.

While the 1989 report focused on the impact of the central government framework on local authorities’ ability to participate in successful urban regeneration, A Life’s Work appraised local authorities’ performance in depth, while also making some recommendations for central government.

A Life’s Work set out the structural and policy context for local authority and other agency involvement in economic development and regeneration. It mapped recent economic change, the geographical distribution of unemployment, and shifting patterns of employment, and gave an analysis of local authority spending. Links were drawn between spatial concentrations of long-term unemployed people and social exclusion.

Local authorities that carried out economic development and regeneration spent an average of over £4 per head of population in 1997/98. The 146 authorities that reported expenditure on the Commission survey recorded a total gross expenditure of £113m. In many cases, this expenditure was augmented substantially by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and other funding streams. Government area-based initiatives were analysed in a chapter that focused on the national framework.

The report found that local authority involvement in economic development activity ranged from the direct provision of economic development services, such as business support, starter units and inward investment marketing; to leadership roles on local economic development partnerships, where different business interests were brought together to foster sector development; and the co-ordination of different departments within the council to meet economic development objectives.

The role of local authorities in delivering economic development activity was reviewed from a number of different perspectives in the report, including jobseekers, businesses and major local partners and stakeholders. The quality of local strategic planning and partnership working as a prerequisite for achieving the best use of resources was analysed in detail. A framework for performance evaluation was set out, with associated performance indicators. The role of mainstream council services was also emphasised. The final chapter is dedicated to suggesting how local authorities can implement the report’s recommendations in a best value context.

Key findings
- There was a pattern of widespread duplication, fragmentation and lack of signposting between different agencies in the provision of services, such as business support and training. As a result, businesses and jobseekers were experiencing severe difficulties in accessing the services they needed, with many unaware of what was provided by local authorities.
Many local authorities had substantial industrial and commercial asset holdings, but the rationale for this portfolio had usually not been reviewed for a substantial period of time. The only regular monitoring of these assets was usually in respect of rental income.

Many councils spent money on inward investment marketing, but without evaluating the cost-effectiveness of what they did alongside the work of other agencies.

Although local authorities were obliged to consult on, and publish, annual statutory economic development plans if they intended to incur expenditure in the forthcoming year, fewer than one-half of authorities responding to the Commission’s survey had a medium-term economic strategy for their area.

As well as being short-term, many strategies and plans were based on an inadequate analysis of the economic, environmental and social position of the area.

Partnership working had improved through the advent of large-scale funding programmes such as SRB. However, improvements still needed to be made in the way that the business, independent and community sectors were involved.

Poor monitoring and outcome evaluation meant that strategies, plans, partnership arrangements and individual interventions were not critically reviewed and revised effectively to reflect what was known to work.

Mainstream services could either inhibit or promote economic development. Council departments needed to work together better to achieve synergy.

With regard to central government funding programmes, there was a proliferation of zones, new deals and initiatives that were not joined up.

Central government funding schemes often encouraged opportunism, short-term planning and evaluation, and the proliferation of separate partnerships for each initiative.

The need for complex matched funding and the incompatible performance monitoring requirements for different sources of government finance was leading to high overhead costs.

Key recommendations

Local authorities need to:

- develop an informed vision, strategy and action plans for the future of the local economy, in partnership with other local agencies and stakeholders;
- review their role in the provision of different economic development services alongside partner agencies and assess to what extent it makes sense to merge, co-locate or otherwise rationalise provision to improve accessibility and minimise confusion and duplication;
- ensure that economic development and regeneration objectives are reflected in the way that mainstream services are delivered; and
- review their assets to ensure their optimal use in meeting economic development objectives.

Central government needs to:

- legislate as soon as practicable for the ‘new duty to promote economic, social and environmental well-being’ (since this recommendation was made, the Local Government Bill 1999 announced the government’s intention to introduce wide-ranging powers for such promotion);
- devise shared performance measurement systems that capture the long-term impact of different regeneration schemes and agencies;
- review the mechanisms for domestic and European regeneration funding, to reduce duplication and bureaucracy, and to promote genuine partnership among local agencies; and
- consider granting greater discretion and flexibility in regeneration funding to those authorities and partnerships that can demonstrate a rigorous, informed and participative approach.
Trading standards services

Background
At the time of the Commission’s report, *Measure for Measure*, local authority trading standards services employed over 3,600 people and spent over £130 million each year to protect consumers from unfair trading, faulty or dangerous goods and substandard services.

The trading environment in which they worked was changing:
- local traders and corner shops were being replaced by large corporations;
- people could also buy goods from itinerant or occasional traders at car-boot sales, one-day sales and weekend markets;
- 24-hour and seven-day opening were becoming increasingly common;
- transactions by telephone and over the internet were growing; and
- consumers’ expectations of standards of safety, quality and value for money were increasing.

Trading standards services also needed to respond to:
- the new duty on local authorities to achieve best value in delivering services; and

Key findings
The report found that costs varied between councils, and that trading standards services in different authorities treated consumers and businesses inconsistently:
- spending per head on trading standards services could vary by a factor of seven between councils;
- the help that consumers received for similar problems varied widely between councils;
- the opening hours for consumer helplines varied significantly;
- on average, local authorities inspected just over one-half of their high-risk trading premises in 1998/99;
- for similar offences, some councils would prosecute a trader while others might only give a warning; and
- a large company might sometimes be prosecuted by several different authorities for the same offence.

These differences arose for a number of reasons:
- nearly two-thirds of councils did not systematically assess local needs;
- only around one-half of councils had consulted on the priorities of their trading standards services; and
- co-ordination between authorities did not always work effectively, resulting in duplication and a reduced ability to deal with rogue traders who crossed council boundaries.
Key recommendations

All trading standards authorities should:

- assess needs, consult consumers and traders, and identify the approaches to enforcement that are most appropriate to local circumstances;
- assess risk and an authority’s ability to make a difference by targeting resources more effectively;
- develop better information systems to help to inform decisions and evaluate performance; and
- use the cornerstones of best value – challenge, compare, consult and compete – as a framework for continuous improvement of the service.

The Commission also recommended that central government could help by providing consolidated guidance for trading standards services and assistance in improving performance management. One government department could take the lead in co-ordinating policy on, and advice to, trading standards services. The Local Government Association (LGA) and professional bodies could assist by encouraging further co-operative working between authorities.
Public transport in urban areas outside London

In the former metropolitan counties, Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs) set policies on public transport and travel. These are implemented by separate Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs). PTAs and PTEs spend £650 million a year. In other major cities, unitary authorities spend £50 million a year supporting public transport and travel.

Most public transport has been privatised. But authorities and PTEs:
- support concessionary travel (i.e. reduced fares for elderly people and other target groups);
- pay for socially necessary bus services that operators will not provide commercially; and
- fund accessible transport services for people who cannot reach the bus stop or negotiate the steps onto a bus.

The PTAs/PTEs also help fund rail services in their areas: the performance monitoring and incentive arrangements in these franchises differ from those on the rest of the rail network. Unitary authorities are not involved with franchises in this way.

Some PTAs/PTEs operate tunnels and ferries: the Tyne and Wear PTE owns and operates the Metro underground railway.

The 1998 White Paper, *A New Deal for Transport*, set an agenda to improve public transport and discourage unnecessary car use to create an accessible, integrated, environmentally sustainable transport system. ‘Quality partnerships’ between authorities and bus operators are a key part of this strategy.

Local Transport Plans (LTPs), which have replaced the previous bidding systems for transport funding, must reflect the agenda in the White Paper. In each former metropolitan county, the PTA and the metropolitan district councils must prepare a joint plan. Urban unitary authorities, the metropolitan district councils and PTAs are also best value authorities.

In 1999 the Audit Commission published *All Aboard*, a national report that reviewed the efficiency and effectiveness of local transport and travel in urban areas outside London. Recommendations were made in the light of the new LTP requirements and the need for authorities to provide best value.

The Transport Bill currently before Parliament is expected to provide a statutory framework for many of the proposals in the White Paper, including LTPs and the creation of a new Strategic Rail Authority.

Key findings

- Many people use public transport only when they have no alternative; and a significant minority of users are dissatisfied with public transport.
- Authorities frequently have only broad definitions of whom they wish to help and comparatively little idea about whether they are succeeding.
- Some authorities fund concessionary fares for children. Elsewhere, operators provide children’s concessions without public subsidy.
- Complex economic calculations that are used to decide how much to pay bus operators in order to compensate them for the drop in fare income caused by concessions, are often based on assumptions rather than hard data about the impact of concessions.
- The Office of Fair Trading has taken action against cartels of bus operators.
- There are weaknesses in how some authorities let contracts for subsidised bus services, monitor these contracts, collect and verify data on the use of concessions, and manage and monitor accessible transport services.
Mechanisms for consulting local people and reporting back to them on performance may need to be improved in order to meet best value standards.

**Key recommendations**

Authorities should:

- apply the ‘4Cs’ of best value when preparing LTPs;
- link transport policies and plans with other policies and initiatives, for example on land-use, as reducing the need to travel is a key part of the new transport agenda;
- decide the role that bus ‘quality partnerships’ will play in their plans, but remain alert for any evidence of anti-competitive collusion by operators;
- work with others, for example, to devise approaches to travel-to-work corridors that cross authority boundaries;
- review policies to identify the people that they most wish to help;
- consider whether operators would provide children’s concessions without public funding or with reduced support;
- draw upon the latest relevant economic research, for example by the Transport Research Laboratory, to review how they reimburse operators for concessionary fares;
- improve how they tender and let, and manage and monitor, contracts for supported bus services and monitor use of concessions;
- ensure that accessible transport services are provided economically and effectively, for example, by market testing parts of the operation; and
- improve their transparency and accountability by setting targets, monitoring achievement and reporting the results to the public.

In addition, PTAs and PTEs should:

- benchmark in-house activities. (PTAs and PTEs employ over 3,000 people); and
- collaborate with the Strategic Rail Authority to review the incentive arrangements in their rail franchises.

Authorities should link transport policies and plans with other policies and initiatives...
Libraries

Background
Libraries are provided under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. In addition to book lending and the provision of reference materials, the majority of library authorities have a wide range of related services, such as audio-visual loans, homework facilities, children’s storytelling, open learning packages and internet access and training.

Although public libraries were, and still are, a very popular and well-used public service, *Due for Renewal* found that there has been a gradual, but unremitting, decline in the number of book loans and in the opening hours of branches. At the same time, new technologies, such as the internet and CD ROMS, offered new ways for the public to access information. Librarians were starting to explore the implications of these new technologies for their traditional services, but little finance was available.

The end of the Net Book Agreement and associated Library Licence in November 1995 was also still presenting challenges for securing better value for money in book purchasing, in a market place that had become both more flexible and more unstable.

This was the backdrop to the Audit Commission’s report on public libraries, which looked at strategic and service planning, the efficiency and effectiveness of stock management, costing library services and the opportunities that advances in information and communications technology (ICT) would hold for the library service of the future.

...there has been a gradual, but unremitting, decline in the number of book loans and in the opening hours of branches.

During the Commission’s research for *Due for Renewal*, the Government responded to a series of published reports setting out proposals for the future of the library service. The Government introduced a requirement for Annual Library Plans (ALPs); and announced a substantial Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) investment in internet links for libraries and associated staff training. Since then, two rounds of ALPs have been assessed by DCMS. In each year, authorities have received individual, confidential feedback on their own plans, and an overall report has been published. While this process has been developing, a number of library services have been formally warned by the Secretary of State for producing poor plans, and several others have been investigated by officials where major cuts and/or service restructuring has been proposed. It is planned to introduce formal DCMS standards for library provision from 1 April 2001, following consultation in 2000.
Key findings

- In England and Wales, 24 million adults were library members and 12 million people used a public library at least once a fortnight. This was well above the level of use of other types of local authority cultural and leisure services.
- Book issues were steadily declining.
- Opening hours were reducing, although the number of service points remained relatively stable.
- The recorded number of enquiries was rising.
- Despite reductions in some of the key indicators of activity, expenditure was rising in real terms.
- Formal service planning was found to be weak or, in some cases, non-existent (prior to the introduction of ALPs).
- There was little understanding of the costs of the library service, related to individual activities and services.
- In the majority of libraries, there were deficiencies in one or more facets of the stock management process.
- Although there was a wide range of individual ICT initiatives in libraries, its use was generally very limited, often due to financial constraints. (Since then DCMS has made significant funds available for public libraries to be connected to the internet and for staff internet training.)

Key recommendations

Library authorities should:

- make fuller use of new technology to enhance the efficiency of traditional library services such as book issue, access to the library catalogue and the provision of reference information;
- establish and maintain processes for costing library services and operations, to identify where efficiency needs to be improved, and to support priority-setting;
- develop integrated stock policies and procedures covering the identification of the desired stock profile, stock audit, stock planning, stock circulation and stock acquisition;
- review their commercial relationships with suppliers of library books to respond to the changes in the book purchasing environment since the abolition of the Net Book Agreement;
- adapt the services that they provide, and the way in which they are delivered, to respond to the many challenges that they face; and
- make their plans more rigorous and coherent to ensure that changes are successful, and to preserve the best of current good practice.
Museums and art galleries

Refer to:
The Road to Wigan Pier?
Managing Local Authority Museums and Art Galleries

Background
At the time of the Audit Commission’s study, there were more than 650 local authority museums and art galleries, varying in size and holding material of regional, national and international significance. There has been little significant change in these numbers since that date. In addition, local authorities have continued to provide grants to independent local museums and galleries.

Financial support for museums and art galleries continues to vary significantly from one authority to another. This support is generally given in the spirit of taking responsibility for safeguarding artefacts or works of art considered to be part of the local or national heritage, but also to support the cultural life of a community and to its sense of identity. Support for museums may also often be regarded in terms of seedcorn funding intended to help encourage tourism or new investment in an area.

The Commission undertook its study at a time when new pressures were brought to bear upon the provision of what were deemed cultural services. The prescription of a national curriculum meant that museums and art galleries would need to ensure that their education programmes met schools’ needs.

The advent of the Museums and Galleries Registration Scheme meant that any facility that failed to register was ineligible to apply for other sources of funding. On 1st April 2000 the Museums and Galleries Commission was replaced by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC).

To consider the viability of continuing to fund a museum or gallery still needs a keen balance between commitment to conservation, scholarship and research and a proven, or potential, ability to reach the intended audience. Officers will therefore find that many of the issues explored, and recommendations made, in the 1991 report are still useful.

Key findings
• Authorities were not always clear why they were supporting a particular museum or gallery and who they intended the ultimate beneficiaries of subsidies and grants to be.
• Curators had difficulties striking a balance between their responsibility for stewardship of a collection and the need to attract the public to view it.
• Many museums and galleries had no discernible collection policy or objectives.
• A number had not fully documented their collections and were storing them under inadequate conditions.

Key recommendations
• Authorities should review their policy on why they give support to museums and art galleries, every three to five years.
• Museums and galleries should set clear objectives, demonstrate how they intend to meet them, and be clear about how their success will be measured.
• Museums and galleries should be committed to a customer-oriented approach which assigns clear responsibilities for customer care and is supported by regular, in-depth market research.
• Policies and procedures should be in place to deal with documentation backlogs; rationalisation of collections and their storage; and future acquisitions.
Entertainment and the arts

Refer to:
Local Authorities, Entertainment and the Arts

Background
At the time of the Commission’s study, the arts funding establishment, headed up by the Arts Council, was undergoing structural change, with regional arts boards due to replace regional arts associations.

Local authority expenditure on entertainment and the arts is discretionary. Nevertheless authorities were spending about as much as the Arts Council on support for the arts....

Entertainments provided were as diverse as children’s shows, wrestling, snooker and the ‘high’ arts. Local authority support could ensure a wider range of opportunities for artists than those that would be offered by commercial producers. The significantly lower admission prices, made possible by subsidy, would permit access to wider audiences, thus helping to bring together the local community.

Similarly, local authority funding might be intended as an investment in favour of the local economy, helping to encourage tourism and business relocation, or in the architectural heritage of a town centre, where, say, a Victorian theatre had come to occupy a prominent position.

In 1991 local authority-owned and -run theatres and arts centres were recovering on average only one-half of their costs as earned income. Other events, in venues such as town halls and libraries, were costing local authorities some £20 million each year.

Key findings
- Local authorities were rarely able to identify who their subsidies were intended to benefit or how successful they were being in reaching target groups.
- Because of complex multiple-funding arrangements, particularly when grants were made to arts bodies, the true levels of local authority subsidy per event or per attendee were difficult to identify.
- The contractual basis for events also differed widely, depending upon how the financial risk was apportioned between the authority and external promoters.

Key recommendations
- Authorities should undertake a policy review every three to five years, to result in an entertainment and arts development plan.
- Market research should be carried out to ensure that subsidies are reaching their targets.
- Grants should be awarded on a quasi-contractual basis: recipients’ artistic objectives should accord with authorities’ aims and funds received should be properly accounted for.
- Venue managers should organise programmes within a framework of objectives and performance indicators set down by the authority.
- Authorities should broaden their funding policies to embrace joint arrangements with other arts funding bodies and partnerships with business.
Policing and crime

**Background**

In recent years the Commission has published several reports addressing areas of operational policing.

Although police productivity had been increasing during the early 1990s, it was not enough to keep pace with the rising levels of crime. There was concern that if crime levels rose to those of some other developed countries, then the clear-up rate would continue to fall. The police were locked into a vicious circle. The volume of crime was threatening to become overwhelming and distract them from taking the proactive approach vital to secure more detections and help to stem the growth in crime. If this pattern was allowed to persist, then the battle against crime was in danger of being lost.

The Commission’s study, *Helping with Enquiries*, analysed the problems and made recommendations for police forces, central government and other agencies in the criminal justice system.

In 1994, the Commission published the update, *Detecting a Change*, which aimed to assess progress on the issues raised in the 1993 report, *Helping with Enquiries*. It found that, since 1993, targeted policing had helped to improve detection of certain types of crime. The report sought to identify specific practices that were helping to account for good performance at both force-wide and local level.

The Police and Magistrates’ Courts Act 1994 also influenced strategic plans to tackle crime. The Act sought to clarify roles and accountabilities, and focus police effort on key areas of activity, especially on crime. It aimed to push greater power to local level, while, in return, police authorities and chief constables would be held to account for how they used their increased powers. The Act established police authorities as free-standing bodies and required them to produce a Local Policing Plan, setting out their priorities and objectives, as well as the Home Secretary’s key objectives, for policing.

Police forces had already devolved many operational management responsibilities to local commanders, but financial management remained highly centralised. To help newly constituted police authorities and forces effect a smooth transition to the new arrangements, the Commission produced a briefing, *Cheques and Balances: A Framework for Improving Police Accountability*, along with a management handbook on police accountability and financial delegation.

In 1996, the Commission published the update, *Detecting a Change*, which aimed to assess progress on the issues raised in the 1993 report, *Helping with Enquiries*. It found that, since 1993, targeted policing had helped to improve detection of certain types of crime. The report sought to identify specific practices that were helping to account for good performance at both force-wide and local level.

In *Helping with Enquiries*, the Audit Commission had referred to the need to address the public’s unrealistic expectations of seeing more ‘bobbies on the beat’ as a response to crime. Patrol work absorbed over one-half of police resources at an annual cost of £4 billion. The Commission’s 1996 report, *Streetwise*, examined whether forces, and the public, were getting the best from this expenditure.
The Commission’s study concluded that there was a mismatch between what the public wanted and what the police could deliver, but, at the same time, there was much the police could do to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of patrol work.

**Key findings**

*Helping with Enquiries*

- The level of recorded crime had risen significantly over the previous decade, but detection rates were falling.
- Part of the reason for the rise in recorded crime was due to the public’s greater propensity to report crime.
- Over the previous decade the number of police officers had risen slightly, whereas the number of crimes handled by each police officer had increased dramatically. Clear-ups per officer had also increased.
- Crimes against the person accounted for only a small proportion of all recorded crime, although they contributed disproportionately to people’s fear of crime.
- A vicious circle was developing as increasing resources were applied reactively to a higher volume of incidents, and resources were taken away from the preventative work needed to stem the growth in crime.

- Three main problems appeared to be at the root of the police’s difficulties in coping with increased crime rates:
  - absence of an integrated approach to crime;
  - sub-optimal use of resources; and
  - a focus on crimes rather than on criminals.

*Detecting a Change*

- Between 1993 and 1995 there had been a modest fall in recorded crime, the most sustained for forty years.
- In two-thirds of forces the overall clear-up rate rose between 1993 and 1995, whereas two years previously there had been a deterioration in all but two forces.
- The clear-up rate for house burglaries had risen. Over three-quarters of forces succeeded in improving the proportion they cleared up.
- By mid-1994 nearly three-quarters of police forces used crime desks or similar systems. Most forces without crime desks were planning to introduce them, or were reviewing their policy.
- By 1994 most forces had computerised the recording of crime, or were planning to do so. However, only a minority had an integrated system of crime recording, crime pattern analysis and criminal intelligence. One-third were planning to develop such systems.
- There was evidence of greater use being made of informants, but forces lacked a systematic approach.

*Streetwise*

- At any one time, only a small minority of officers were actually out on patrol.
- Crime levels had almost doubled since 1980 and 999 calls had risen significantly, but crime accounted for only one-third of calls for police service. Police officers were increasingly being asked to deal with other problems, such as nuisance and anti-social behaviour.
- In a survey, people declared that they were highly satisfied with most police work – much of which was undertaken by patrol officers – but were dissatisfied with levels of foot patrol.
- In many forces patrol work was highly reactive. Work with local communities and proactive patrolling suffered as a consequence.
- One of the reasons for the high level of reactivity was due to poor decision-making in the control room – officers spent much of their available time waiting to be sent to incidents, many of which did not even merit police attendance.
- Demand varied according to the time of day, but shift systems did not always ensure that the officers were on duty when they were most needed.
- Moreover, non-incident time was not being used as productively as it could have been, because clear objectives were rarely set for patrol officers.
The quality of briefings was variable and debriefings were rare. As a consequence, there was a reduced commitment to gathering and sharing intelligence.

Some police forces were missing opportunities offered by the Special Constabulary to help to bridge the gap between supply and demand for visible policing.

Though there had been efforts to endow managing a beat with higher status, ingrained attitudes still prevailed.

Key recommendations

Helping with Enquiries

The report concluded that police forces needed to develop a clear management framework, make better use of existing resources and target the criminal. The following specific recommendations were made:

- together, police authorities and forces should translate core policing activities into local priorities, so that the service reflects local needs;
- forces should make explicit what priority is attached to crime management within force objectives, and enhance the status of crime prevention;
- redeployment of resources into crime management should be considered, in particular to generate a capacity at both force-wide and local level for more proactive work;
- a core role should be defined for CID and detectives deployed in order to make best use of their expertise;
- forces should consider the establishment of crime desks or their expansion into crime management units;
- forces should endeavour to improve the quality of their first response to burglaries in order to avoid duplication of effort;
- supervision of investigations at Basic Command Unit (BCU) level should be strengthened through training, adjustments to caseload, establishment of larger investigative teams and case monitoring systems;
- closer links should be developed between investigation and support functions such as intelligence; and
- the resourcing of the intelligence function should be enhanced, for example with higher calibre staff and improved technological support.
Cheques and Balances

The management handbook contains detailed action checklists at the end of each chapter to help police authorities to manage the transition to freestanding bodies, including the preparation of Local Policing Plans.

- Forces and police authorities should review, and then decide on, their preferred option for the provision of support services; and service standards should be established for all support functions.
- The extension of financial delegation to frontline commanders should be set within a wider framework of performance management.
- Some forces need to go much further to exploit the full benefits of devolved budgeting.
- Forces need to develop frameworks of financial control that are suited to a devolved regime, for example, cost code structures and formula-based budget allocation.
- Forces should review their current planning processes so that the statutory requirement to prepare Local Policing Plans can be integrated effectively with existing plans.
- Strategies for competitive tendering should be in place. Forces need to improve costing mechanisms.

Streetwise

- Police forces should improve the application of graded response, through assessing emergencies more accurately and screening incidents that do not need police attendance, and monitoring its implementation.
- Improvements should be made to the training and supervision of control room staff.
- Forces should consider introducing help desks to deal with some calls from the public.
- Shift patterns should be reviewed and absences from duty, especially sickness, should be better managed.
- Better use should be made of special constables.
- Forces should set objectives for patrol and develop quantitative and qualitative performance indicators.
- Targets should be set for high visibility patrol and achievement should be monitored against them.
- Officers should be tasked so that non-incident time is used for local objectives.
Police estate management

Police stations form the hub of operational policing and offer visible reassurance to local communities, second only to the sight of officers on patrol. At the time of the Commission’s study, police authorities in England and Wales owned property worth over £2.6 billion and spent £170 million each year on its upkeep. The estate comprised 2,700 operational sites (of which around 2,000 were police stations) and 4,000 residential units.

In addition to forming a significant component of total expenditure, the police estate is a strategic asset that affects the ability of forces to deliver effective policing services. The police often face stiff local opposition to the closure of police stations, and this has sometimes been used as an excuse for inaction. However, forces must satisfy themselves, their authorities, and the Government that property assets are being used in such a way as to secure economy and maximise operational effectiveness.

From April 1999, police authorities must secure year-on-year efficiency gains. To achieve this, and meet best value, authorities and forces need to:

- understand and manage public expectations;
- close the gap between operational requirements and the existing estate; and
- address weaknesses in asset management.

Key findings

- Changes in patterns of crime, together with new housing, retail or transport developments, meant that some police stations were no longer in the most convenient locations, either for public or police access.
- Only a small minority of visitors to police stations are reporting a crime or accident. Most public contact with the police was by telephone, but few forces have considered replacing some stations with video or internet links.
- Some forces were not looking sufficiently far ahead to prepare for the impact of future policing changes on their estates.
- Forces made poor use of their space – reviews of police stations identified substantial spare floorspace capacity. In some forces, one-third of total space was used for non-operational purposes such as recreational facilities, canteens and gyms.
- Assets valued at £110 million had been declared surplus, but had not yet been sold.
- There were significant variations between forces in property running costs, indicating that efficiency savings were possible; but few forces held cost information on individual buildings.

Refer to:

Action Stations
Improving the Management of the Police Estate
National Report, 1999, 1862401381, £20

Action Stations
A Management Handbook on Improving the Management of the Police Estate

See also:

Hot Property
Getting the Best from Local Authority Assets
National Report, 2000, 1862402205, £20
Many buildings were in poor physical condition – there was a serious backlog of repairs that will cost at least £205 million – but most forces had cut their maintenance budgets in recent years.

Not all forces had a sufficiently professional and rigorous estate management function.

**Key recommendations**

Police forces should:
- link property decisions more explicitly to operational objectives;
- pursue innovative alternatives to traditional police buildings and methods of service delivery;
- rationalise their estates by disposing of buildings that are unnecessary, unsuitable or have maintenance liabilities that are beyond the force’s means;
- improve property information and performance monitoring; and
- review the arrangements for providing or purchasing estate services, so as to ensure best value.

Police authorities should:
- ensure that a property strategy is prepared and that property initiatives are included in the Local Policing Plan; and
- seek views from the public on how they would prefer to access police services and work with forces to identify opportunities to share buildings with other agencies.

The Home Office should:
- rationalise existing capital funding for the police and provide forces with guidance on financial mechanisms to promote better use of property.

**Police authorities should seek views from the public on how they would prefer to access police services...**
Police surgeons

Refer to:
The Doctor’s Bill
The Provision of Forensic Medical Services to the Police

Background

The Commission’s report, The Doctor’s Bill, found that the cost of forensic medical services to the police (around £20m a year) was small compared to overall police spending. However, these services could have a significant impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of custody suites, and indeed, on other aspects of the criminal justice system. The role of ‘police surgeons’ goes back to 1830, but their work has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. The modern police surgeon conducts two principal types of examination:

- forensic examinations, to provide evidence for court proceedings (for example, taking blood samples or examining victims of assault); and
- non-forensic, therapeutic examinations, looking at detained persons where there is a suspicion that they may be unfit for detention or interview, as a result of illness or injury, or where the person asks to see a doctor.

The report found that the second category accounted for most police surgeon work.

Most police surgeons are general practitioners. The police pay them an annual retainer and a call-out fee, in accordance with agreed national rates.

Key findings

- Police surgeons’ work was more complicated than it used to be.
- The cost of the service had risen significantly.
- Some forces (especially rural forces) found it difficult to recruit and retain police surgeons.
- Many custody officers had not received proper training in when to call out a police surgeon, nor were they trained in first aid.
- The service was largely unmanaged, with no standard approach to contractual arrangements or training, and police forces rarely collected information on surgeons’ workloads or unit costs, so it was difficult for the police to know whether they were achieving best value.
- The quality of service provided to those examined (and, therefore, to the police) was variable. There were no national standards, so it was difficult to guarantee a high standard of work.
- In police station custody suites there were problems such as inadequate facilities for monitoring the condition of, and treating, detainees, particularly in older police stations. This was especially true for mentally ill detainees, who need special care.

- There was also poor communication between doctors and police, with no standard format for recording doctors’ instructions – there may be serious consequences where custody officers cannot understand instructions left by doctors.

Key recommendations

Police forces should:

- collect and analyse information on demand and workload;
- ensure custody officers are properly trained and supervised;
- improve custody suite facilities and procedures, especially for mentally ill detainees;
- develop a standardised approach to recording police surgeons’ advice;
- introduce formal, structured recruitment procedures and management arrangements for police surgeons – peer group assessment of surgeons’ work could strengthen quality assurance;
- introduce contracts for police surgeons, with monitored targets and quality standards; and
- consider whether local circumstances merit departure from national terms of renumeration, or movement from individual to block contracts.
Youth justice

**Background**

By the time of the Commission’s first report in this area, tackling crime was already high on the public agenda. There were at least 28 million offences being committed each year. Crimes against the individual had increased. A significant proportion of crime was being committed in a small number of areas, most of which were deprived.

Deprived areas were characterised by large numbers of poor, single-adult households, and young people who were often causing disturbance or nuisance to others. More than one-quarter of known offenders were under the age of 18. Most juvenile crime was being committed by a small number of persistent offenders, often brought up in high-crime areas.

Young offenders are dealt with separately from adults by a variety of central and local agencies: police, youth justice services, probation, legal aid, the Crown Prosecution Service, youth court, crown court and the prison service. Altogether, these public services were spending around £1 billion a year. The police alone were spending about £660 million identifying and processing young people who had offended. The Audit Commission’s national report, *Misspent Youth*, found that resources needed to be shifted from processing young offenders to tackling their behaviour.

Initiatives to prevent juvenile offending and anti-social behaviour needed to be developed and evaluated. These would need to be tailored to deal with different types of young offenders: persistent offenders, those beginning to develop a pattern of offending, first-time offenders and those most at risk of becoming young offenders.

Some eighteen months later, the Commission published the results of its review of the work of local agencies. They showed that many of those involved still had much to do to meet the challenges soon to face them: the Government was proposing new legislation on crime and disorder and major reform of the youth justice system.

The introduction of new statutory responsibilities through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provided a platform for better co-ordination and the focusing of existing efforts more clearly around local concerns. Its implementation placed a new joint responsibility on local authorities and police forces to work in partnership with relevant agencies to reduce crime and disorder.
Key findings

- On average, a young person appeared in the youth court four times in the course of one case, over a period that could stretch for as long as 170 days from arrest to sentence. Four out of five cases observed were adjourned, usually because one or other of the participants was not ready or did not turn up. In the Commission’s second update, the average time from arrest to sentence was reduced by one month.

- The effectiveness of different kinds of sentence on re-offending by young people was rarely being monitored. Information systems were often inadequate and did not facilitate data exchange between agencies.

- Only a very small proportion of offenders were being given ‘caution plus’ programmes. If one in five young offenders accepted a ‘caution plus’ programme instead of being processed through the courts, about £40 million a year could be redirected to prevent youth crime. In the second update, a slightly higher proportion of offenders were given the ‘caution plus’ programmes.

- Nearly one-half of offenders sentenced in youth court had been excluded from school, while nearly one-quarter were habitual truants.

- Over one-half of young offenders on supervision orders had little to do as they were neither in work nor education. The majority of them admitted to taking drugs and more than one-half of them got drunk at least once a week.

- One-third of supervision plans failed to address the educational or employment needs of offenders.

- On average, only around one-third of youth justice workers’ time was spent addressing offending behaviour.

Key recommendations

- All those involved in bringing cases to court need to consider how best to work together to reduce the delay before a young offender’s first appearance and the number of subsequent appearances.

- All local authorities should develop ‘caution plus’ and bail support programmes in conjunction with other local agencies.

- Youth justice services should ensure that more staff time is spent on direct work with young offenders and that reparation is considered as part of a court order, where appropriate.

- Supervision orders should be started promptly with an explicit plan to address any employment or education difficulties.

- Information systems should be developed to facilitate sharing of relevant data between agencies.

- Authorities that do not already have multi-agency teams, involving social services, probation, police, education and health service staff, should establish them before April 2000.

- Local authorities and the police should involve local people when drawing up and implementing community safety strategies and should include in those strategies action to prevent young people becoming involved in crime.

- Savings from better use of the youth justice system should be made available for youth crime prevention work. Parental assistance programmes should be piloted and evaluated to help people bringing up their children in difficult circumstances to improve their parenting skills.

- Local education authorities should provide intensive, structured education for under-fives in areas of high risk and deprivation, and support and advice for schools to help them deal with difficult pupils.

- Young people at risk should be encouraged to engage in leisure activities, such as sport, that promote a positive and responsible self-image and improve reasoning, communication and social skills.

- Local authorities should consider providing support for vulnerable young people and their families as an integrated service and targeting it where it is most needed.

- Multi-agency Drug Action Teams need to ensure that services are developed that cater for the needs of those under the age of 18.
Community safety impacts directly on all citizens’ quality of life. Personal safety is often a key concern for people who live in the most deprived areas. For some people, a fear of crime keeps them housebound; for others, their lives have been ruined by victimisation.

Until recently, the focus on crime, rather than anti-social behaviour, meant that many issues that made people feel unsafe were marginalised.

The Commission’s study began while the Crime and Disorder Bill was going through Parliament, thus, knowledge of ‘what works’ in community safety was far from developed. The report, Safety in Numbers, was published when local partnerships were starting to tackle the formulation of their first three-year statutory strategies. It offered an informed commentary and suggested ways of improving understanding about community safety activities, as well as the opportunity to learn from current good practice. The Commission’s community safety website expands upon and updates the good practice case studies used in the report.

The Commission described as ‘promising’ the start local agencies had made in addressing the issue of community safety. However, it cautioned that any sustainable impact on the problem was going to take time to achieve and would require a long-term commitment at all levels to partnership working. A new, concerted approach to promoting community safety was needed to reflect local people’s priorities. A key success factor was that community safety should be viewed by mainstream services as a core part of their work.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 would provide a number of new tools for agencies – such as community safety orders and child curfew schemes – that could be viewed by the public as panaceas for local problems. The Commission advised new partnerships to ensure such tools were used only where they offered the best solution.

The Commission also made a number of recommendations to central government. For example, it called for support for learning about what works, and urged the Government to provide incentives for the development of community safety work. It also emphasised the importance of a coherent approach to community safety across central government departments – in particular, government departments needed to review how top-down objectives would mesh with the bottom-up approach of local partnerships.
**Key findings**

- Consultation on community safety was often given insufficient emphasis, with poorly co-ordinated exercises that tended to ask the same groups the same questions on different occasions, and result in a list of generalised issues.
- Common concerns about community safety go far beyond serious crimes, and this needs to be reflected in strategies.
- Limited mapping and analysis of problems, a lack of understanding of what works, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation, meant that there was no structured approach to strategy development.
- Although some co-ordinators were adept at networking and sharing good practice, the lack of a common skills and knowledge base for community safety work had hindered progress.
- National performance indicators were failing to reflect the shift in emphasis from crime to community safety – police forces, for example, still experienced pressure to increase detections per officer rather than to reduce crime.
- Underdeveloped cost-benefit thinking, difficulties with identifying budgets, and insufficient investment in staff were major obstacles to securing investment for community safety.
- Community safety work was undermined by its dependency on fundraising, and reliance on the skill and ingenuity of individual police and community safety officers to secure resources.
- In 1998 only a minority of local authorities and police forces had a separate budget for community safety work of more than £100,000 a year.
- The problem of aligning budgets with outcomes made it difficult to ensure the effective use of public funds spent on community safety.
- A major challenge for partnerships was the absence of coterminous boundaries between agencies, making it difficult to determine who should be in the partnership in the first place.
- Crowded corporate agendas meant that there was often much discussion of broadly similar agendas but little co-ordination at either strategic or delivery level.
- It was difficult to find clear documentary evidence of actions that had been decided at partnership meetings.
...the lack of a common skills and knowledge base for community safety work had hindered progress.

Key recommendations

- Partnerships need to establish a vision of a healthy community and work out how they intend to develop it.
- Partnerships should take stock of existing consultation mechanisms and develop a coherent communications strategy to ensure that key groups are identified and heard.
- Partnerships need to develop a concerted approach to ensure that they engage with, and support, key groups in high crime areas.
- Using their own experience and research, partnerships need to develop a learning approach to community safety by setting up systems that enable them to:
  - set baselines for improvement;
  - appraise critically the different options for strategies appropriate to their areas; and
  - monitor processes and outcomes against baselines, in order to learn what works.
- Partnerships should endeavour to account for activities that contribute to community safety, using a financial reporting format that reflects their aims and objectives.
- When seeking initial investment for community safety projects, partnerships should consider adopting a cost-benefit approach to make their case.
- Senior managers in partnership agencies should make clear that community safety is a priority from the point of recruitment through to appraisal, training, promotion and career development.
- Partnerships need to ensure that staff within different agencies and departments understand how their work relates to community safety.
- Links need to be established between partner agencies at a number of levels to create the infrastructure of people and systems that enables partnerships to run smoothly.
- Strategy documents should provide a clear audit trail, showing what actions have been agreed and who is accountable.
- Efforts should be made to align corporate planning processes, such as the annual policing plan for police forces and local authority budgets and community plans, with community safety strategies.
The Fire service

The Audit Commission’s report, *In the Line of Fire*, found that over the previous decade the number of fires had increased by a fifth; serious fires and fire injuries had also risen significantly. Compared with other developed countries, the fire mortality rate in the United Kingdom was high.

But, at the same time as workloads were rising, net expenditure on unfunded pensions was predicted to rise substantially as a proportion of the overall budget over the next decade. The ability of the service to respond at local level to the twin demands of an increasing workload and growing financial pressures was seriously constrained.

Although run by local fire authorities, brigades operate within a prescriptive national framework, determined by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC). The framework recommends standards for the speed and weight of response to incidents. Approval from the Home Secretary is needed for any changes to a brigade’s firefighting establishment that could affect nationally prescribed standards of fire cover.

Since 1995, and in the wake of local government reorganisation, there have been a number of changes to the fire service infrastructure. The eight Welsh county brigades have been combined to form three new fire authorities. In England, there are now only 44 brigades.

The Home Office and the CFBAC set up a joint committee to consider the Commission’s recommendations for changes to the national framework, as set out in the report. The joint committee produced their response, *Out of the Line of Fire*, in July 1998. Following publication of that document, the Home Office has initiated a number of pathfinder trials of risk assessment – due for completion at the end of 2000 – with a view to changing the basis on which fire cover is determined.

The advent of best value and the comprehensive spending review have also advanced the fire service’s agenda. Other major changes that have been, or will shortly be, implemented include:

- review of the funding formula to remove perverse incentives, particularly the fire calls indicator;
- establishment of a new fire safety centre;
- greater emphasis in the Fire and Emergency Planning Department of the Home Office on fire prevention and education, including the establishment of a national community fire safety unit;
- restructuring of the CFBAC to enable closer monitoring of change programmes;
- using best value powers to instigate a service-wide review of training in 2003; and
- commissioning a national review of sickness absence and ill-health retirement.

Refer to:

*In the Line of Fire
Value for Money in the Fire Service – the National Picture
National Report, 1995, 0118864041, £10
In the Line of Fire
Value for Money in the Fire Service – the National Picture
Summary Report, 1995, D78886405X, £6

See also:

*Calling the Tune
Performance Management in Local Government
National Report, 1995, 0118861344, £9
Paying the Piper...Calling the Tune
People, Pay and Performance in Local Government
Management Handbook, 1995, 0118861387, £30
Retiring Nature
Early Retirement in Local Government
National Report, 1997, 1862400555, £20
Retiring Nature Update
Early Retirement in Local Government
Update, 2000, 1862401845, £10
Recent statistics show that since 1995 there has been an overall downward trend both in the number of fires in buildings and in the number of casualties. Some efforts have been made to review conditions of service for employees, including pensions, but, so far, no changes have been agreed.

**Key findings**

- The fire service was responding to over one-half as many more incidents in 1995 than ten years earlier and met national response standards in 95 per cent of cases.
- The number of false alarms had risen considerably and accounted for a significant proportion of all incidents. More than one-third of these were malicious calls.
- An inappropriate funding formula meant that a brigade that was successful in reducing the incidence of fire calls could see its income fall by substantially more than the unit cost saved per incident.
- The operational savings achieved by downgrading an area from A risk to B risk were unlikely to match the reduction in Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) under the existing funding formula.
- Providing fire cover – maintaining and crewing stations and firefighting appliances – accounted for the majority of a typical fire authority’s costs.
- Fire brigades were generally well managed, but there were opportunities for them to achieve greater value for money and make cost savings.

**Key recommendations**

- Insurance companies, developers and local agencies should work together to increase fire safety.
- Fire authorities should be given greater discretion to assess risk and set fire cover.
- Perverse incentives should be removed from the funding formula.
- A review of conditions of service, including pensions, should be expedited.
- Fire authorities should take action to control the incidence of early retirements.
- Fire authorities should identify opportunities to release savings for redeployment, such as reduction in stand-down time and collaboration on the use of control rooms and training.
Implementing dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

Background
The United Kingdom has long been a place of sanctuary for people fleeing war or persecution, but, in recent years, the system for processing asylum applications and settling those granted leave to remain has been under severe strain. Following the withdrawal of social security benefits for many applicants, social services departments have had to act as an unofficial support agency, providing accommodation and subsistence to destitute asylum seekers. As most asylum seekers arrive in the South East, councils in London and Kent have faced particular pressures in meeting the needs of this group.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 aims to address these problems by controlling the number of asylum seekers entering the country; speeding up the decision-making process; and supporting those who are destitute under new arrangements while their application is considered. From April 2000, the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has provided all new port-of-entry asylum seekers with accommodation and financial support, mainly in the form of vouchers. In-country applicants will also be brought into the scheme over the course of the year, in phases.

To relieve pressure on London and Kent, NASS intends to disperse asylum seekers across Britain on a ‘no-choice’ basis, to areas with available accommodation, existing multi-ethnic populations and the scope to develop voluntary sector and community support services. In practice, the availability of accommodation may be the determining factor. Local agencies such as councils, health authorities, housing associations, voluntary groups and others will have an important role to play. A wide range of support services, such as education and healthcare, will continue to be provided at a local level. In addition, agencies will be expected to work together in new structures of ‘regional consortia’, in which local authorities will play an ‘enabling role’, bringing service providers together to meet the needs of new arrivals.

The Commission’s report, Another Country, offers guidance to councils and health authorities, drawing upon the experiences of those organisations that have had a longer history of providing support to asylum seekers. It focuses on:

- how the new support arrangements will work;
- what local agencies should do to prepare for new arrivals in their community;
- how services for asylum seekers can be delivered most effectively; and
- the changes needed at a national level in order to make dispersal work.

This report can assist local and health authority members and managers in planning and delivering support services for asylum seekers. Although targeted at those authorities receiving asylum seekers dispersed from London and Kent, areas with established asylum-seeking and refugee communities may also find the report useful, as it highlights areas of concern and good practice in service delivery. Some of the report’s findings and recommendations are equally relevant to other partner organisations, such as housing associations, police authorities and the employment service. The report also makes a number of important recommendations for the Home Office.
Key findings

The success of the new dispersal arrangements could be hampered by inadequate local services and poor community relations:

- failure to secure sufficient accommodation has proved a barrier to dispersal;
- legal advice and interpretation services are in short supply outside the capital; and
- in some areas, community tensions have been raised by emotive and sensational media reporting.

Good practice does exist, but it is far from universal:

- poor information about asylum seekers’ needs often hinders service planning;
- language barriers and low staff awareness of asylum seekers’ rights and entitlements are persistent problems; and
- some schools and GPs are reluctant to accept asylum seekers, especially if they impose new demands on over-stretched services.

Key recommendations

Local agencies should develop co-ordinated strategies to meet the needs of asylum seekers by:

- making local services more accessible;
- promoting positive public relations strategies and sensitive policing policies; and
- developing more employment and training schemes to facilitate the integration of those allowed to stay in the UK.

Central government can help by making parallel improvements in the national framework:

- faster decisions on applications need to be sustained by the Home Office;
- the Home Office should ensure better co-ordination of policy for asylum seekers at a national level; and
- funding by different government departments should cover the reasonable costs of statutory services (such as health and education), and promote value for money.

Legal advice and interpretation services are in short supply outside the capital.
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