

10 Corporate responsibility

Local Government Task Force



Innovation Best Practice Productivity



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When my bionic hips failed to set the courts metal detector alarm system off, I knew that the day would end in tears. Ever since I had my hips resurfaced with titanium the only downside has been the never-ending sounding of bells when I go through a metal detector. But not this day.

When I had what I refer to as a 'proper job', one that most of you would recognise as gainful local authority employment, almost my final act was to listen whilst the judge at Isleworth Crown Court passed sentence. There was I, the head of property services, listening to why we had failed. How invidious it was that as a direct result of funding shortages, a maintenance failing now led to the authority having its coffers still further depleted by the imposition of a fine! And all of this following on from having previously been chastened by listening to three magistrates telling me that they regarded the issue as being so serious that they felt their powers insufficient. Hence our appearance in the Crown Court.

How did we get there? Some children in a school playground playing football. A wayward kick struck a hopper head. The hopper head, a substantial piece of cast-iron ware fell, striking a pupil on the head. Through great fortune the boy survived and made a full recovery, but it was touch and go for some time.

What had we done wrong? The HSE investigation revealed that at some time in the past the backboard had been replaced using inadequate fixings - too short. No-one ever knew when this had been done. Almost certainly well before my reign, but now I was the one responsible. What was the most idiosyncratic part was that I personally was exonerated, and it was my own reports that were used by the HSE to pursue my authority. As a dutiful chief officer I had on a number of occasions reported to the appropriate committee that they were failing to properly maintain their buildings, and that as a consequence, should health and safety become imperilled then I would have no alternative but to close the building in question. Quite right said the HSE, so why didn't you close this school before the tumbling hopper head almost did irreparable damage?

Because I didn't know it was faulty was my reply.

Why not asked the inspector? Didn't you have a regular programme of inspections in place?

Yes said I, but how could they ascertain that the fixings used were inadequate without testing to destruction?

Tricky one this, surely the answer is that your quality procedures should have ensured that the correct fixings were used.

Now at this point I need to tell you that I haven't told you the whole story, because the rainwater pipe to which the hopper head discharged had, again at some indeterminate time, been replaced with UPVC. On top of that the rectangular spigot had been jammed into a circular down-pipe. Yes I know that's just asking for trouble leaving a cast iron fitting perilously perched on top of a wobbly piece of plastic. Surely our regular inspections had indicated this potential hazard?

Well no they hadn't.

Game, set and match to the HSE.

So, ultimately it wasn't the hopelessly inadequate maintenance budget that was to blame. It was two, probably unconnected duff bits of maintenance work (we never could track down when these things had been done) followed by a short-sighted inspection regime, that clearly didn't go looking for potential problems.

I was mightily relieved that the boy made a full recovery. I made a lasting resolve to work with partners in maintaining the buildings which lie at the heart of our communities, in a way which



squeezes every last drop out of the resources at our disposal. 'Cheap' repairs and less than effective inspection regimes that sought not to find problems that we knew we could afford to address, had very nearly cost one young person their life. There has to be a better way.

Efficiency Matters

The first cut of the Annual Efficiency Statements (AES) submissions, the forward look for 2005/6, revealed that 77% of the projected savings were cashable. Those of you that have heard me speak on this subject in the past few months will have heard my concerns about just focusing on the numbers, and forgetting the very real benefits that can be realised

from driving up quality through smarter procurement. Best value is consistently defined in terms of whole life performance - and absolutely not just lowest initial price. Defect and dispute free products and projects do have very real benefits - and value! And what is the value of avoiding accidents? Ignoring the potential terrible consequences to the child injured, just imagine the costs of the resulting investigations and legal fees.

Improved quality does bring very tangible benefits. Don't ignore them in your efficiency review gains, just because they are more difficult to measure. ■

“Best value is consistently defined in terms of whole life performance.”



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