I am pleased to submit a response to the LG&R committee call for evidence on service development and service re-configuration. I have focused on a limited number of areas; those in which I currently have a direct and specific interest.

How are opportunities for sharing services being identified?

I am aware of discussions going on within many councils and with other cross boundary bodies. I remain of the view – and I am currently exploring this more fully – that opportunities for sharing of services is more likely to be achieved amongst a smaller number of bodies than the number that some of the more ambitious projects have attempted. This is particularly so if this involves dynamic human services rather than just commodity product/service purchase, although even that can sometimes run into difficulties. Such sharing is complex and involves the exploration and resolution of service tensions; high frictional costs in terms of staff and decision makers time; and often considerable sensitivities about abandoning cherished legacy modes of activity. In some such cases, remember that legacy may be as short a time period as 6 months to a year.

Substantial multi sector research, practical immediate experience and everyday observation suggests this is better initially accomplished with fewer partners, perhaps 2-3 rather than 6 or more. If members doubt this, reflect on those occasions when you and your partner have been trying to agree where to eat out; now extend that to 3 other family members and 4 friends; QED.

What is hindering moves toward developing shared and innovative service delivery models? In areas where moves to alternative service delivery models are not being pursued, what efforts are being made to standardise, streamline and simplify existing methods of delivery?

I have 3 observations, all in relation to the increased use of digital technologies that is central to these kind of changes.

1. In many instances, and amongst many different bodies I observe ‘transition ‘ delays at play. That is when the shift from paper / electronic is often dogged by residual systems that are paper based. An example; last year I received expenses payment from this Parliament for the sum of £18. I was sent a PDF attached to an email as notice; the cash was BACS transferred that day; the next day I received a [1st class] letter repeating the same information but in a different form. I have similar experience with other public [and private] bodies.

2. Councils [and other bodies] have varied approaches to electronic broadcast media which vary in their push/pull capacity. Many public bodies have a heavy reliance on the internet and the council website so information...
becomes ‘pull’ in form. This clearly requires tough editorial control which is not always present; I would suggest, for instance that in this week [wc 21st] school closure should have more prominence that, say, by-election; carer breaks; housing strategy. Such immediate notices should also be allied to use of other electro-media to be most effective [Twitter; RSS; subscription email etc]. It is clear to me that of the councils recently affected by snow the electronic communication is much improved over 2009; 2010 but still has some weaknesses in some councils. Even so a home-page headline notice that says: “Council services affected by heavy snow…” is surely of limited value to most people.

3. The ownership of mobile phones [and often therefore access to social media such as Facebook] is more widely spread than is internet connection + PC ownership. It also appears – on the data we have available - to be less socially /economically differentiated; i.e. poorer people are more likely to have ‘phone than they are a PC and Internet. Familiarity with Facebook might make this a more accessible medium than logging onto a council web site at say 0700 for school information.

What legislative barriers are there to developing shared and innovative service delivery models to their full potential?

Few; it is open to councils [to make such arrangements [1973 Act, S 56 and 65] without much legal difficulty.

One factor that is pertinent is the potential impact of VAT regulation. While I would expect any major service review [that must necessarily be part of any shared service discussions] can yield savings of approximately 10%, the prospect of VAT charges puts in a cash hurdle of 20% which is a high barrier and not one that creates the kind of savings certainty that decision makers prefer.

In what areas is there scope for national shared services along the lines of the shared recruitment portal for local authorities ‘myjobscotland’?

Not all such developments – and in many respect this has been a good development – are of unalloyed benefit to society. This job site [and similar] provides a good example of some potential disadvantages; I am not sure if these have been reviewed by any agency involved, but if not, then they should be.

1. The use of such media has clearly had an impact on newspapers at a national level; it is only necessary to read the Scottish papers [and editions] on a Friday and Sunday to see this. On the other hand, the Metro remains a popular medium for lower salary and local posts in local government so the changeover has benefitted the Daily Mail group at the same time possibly damaging city based Scottish papers. Curiously [at least to me], in this last week adverts for 5 hour crossing patrol staff at a Scottish council were on the Guardian Education site.

2. I worry that the broad transition to electronic job sites may have created what we might call an ‘insider recruitment vehicle’. If you know where to look, and have a PC /Internet, you might scan such jobs – if you don’t know that this is now the main medium for staff recruitment then you may not even be aware of such jobs availability.

3. I also think this illustrates my point in my opening comments; where a service/resource of any kind is viewed as being on the commodity end of the spectrum it is easier to get sign up than if it engages more dynamic and sensitive elements of the service profile.