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written by Lynda King Taylor,
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Lynda King Taylor can be contacted on:
Tel: +44 (0)20 7262 1531 Mobile: +44 (0)7775 658067
Fax: +44 (0)20 7706 1551

LKTLondon@aol.com • www.lyndakingtaylor.com

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Where Alex leads, others follow

When it comes to leadership and business excellence, Alex Linkston and West Lothian Council constantly drive up the standards. The award-winning chief tells Lynda King Taylor about their latest ambitions

Dr Johnson said more knowledge is gained of a man's real character by a short conversation with his servants than from formal and studied narrative. Inside and outside West Lothian Council, chief executive Alex Linkston has earned a reputation for "tremendous leadership" skills. It is evident he is a man who gets things done with the support of all. The Quality Scotland Awards for Business Excellence in late 2007 saw public sector manager Linkston beat the nation's best to its leadership award.

West Lothian has the fastest growing population in Scotland, demanding investment in more services. Over the next 10-15 years, depending on the rate of house building, it aims to build the equivalent of three secondary schools that will cost £30m each, in addition to 17 streams of primary schools. In all, £185m needs to be invested in new schools provision and, says Linkston: "Not a single penny will come from government. We have to rely 100 per cent on developer contributions to fund that. That's never happened anywhere else in the UK but we are confident we can do it." Council plans will ensure infrastructure is in place to maximise contributions from the private developers for balanced communities.

Fundamental to the council's progress has been creating an organisation that is "outward looking to our communities rather than inward looking to our own processes," says Linkston. "Committeeism and departmentalism were eliminated and we created services. That was a huge cultural change. It means that on any issue the council can develop one policy, one voice. We may have heated discussions within the council to determine what our position is – then, when we are speaking to any third party, we give that one view."

In local government you are as good as your staff allow you to be. "You have to invest in your people and they must take ownership of what they do," he says. "We appoint good staff and nurture them. It is they who go out and discover best practice in Scotland or across the UK and bring that back for West Lothian adaptation. Plagiarism is one of the best business practices. We encourage staff to benchmark with the best."

Managing cultural change itself is intravenous. It is perpetual and "for good business reasons. Unions have often been our biggest supporters in change. We keep challenging staff on better ways to work".

An assessment template works alongside Quality Scotland, a national partner organisation for European Foundation Quality Model (EFQM), that



BELOW: Alex Linkston heads a West Lothian Council team that has something to shout about



routinely has all staff benchmarking themselves against best in class which "keeps you at the cutting edge of excellence and not ignoring public preferences and priorities".

Linkston has a systematic approach to continuous improvement: they have adapted EFQM to a local authority setting, incorporating Investors in People and Cabinet Office Charter Mark principles – applying their model to all business units across the council for 68 key services. He believes in keeping it simple: "I can see the whole council on one sheet of paper. I see where we are strong and weak, both within the council and from an outsiders' perspective or within any particular service," he says.

West Lothian has been a pioneer of local outcome agreements. Linkston insists you have to move outside council boundaries and work with partners. Joined-up services were the norm in West Lothian long before others coined the phrase. A community health and care partnership, where primary and social care is jointly managed, this year moves to a pooled budget.

Likewise, with crime reduction, West Lothian has led with policing schemes such as safer neighbourhoods and a joint community safety board with citizens, police and council staff jointly dealing with issues in one sitting. The number of calls to police has gone down by 60 per cent where this strategy has been introduced.

Many youngsters leave school at 16 ready to trip into benefits, crime or drugs – hence the need for an employment shared service strategy. He is keen to remove an indigenous benefits mentality, and, in conjunction with Jobcentre Plus, they are developing quality of life aspirations. He recalls a footballer visiting a local school and receiving respect for his designer trainers. One primary six youngster said they were the type he was going to buy with his "first giro" on leaving school. Having children with ambition that extends no further than

collecting unemployment benefit demands our action, says Linkston.

He encourages a constant supply of ideas – "we sometimes come up with solutions before they become problems" – and while admitting that awards are at best a by-product of providing good services, Linkston says: "I would expect the council to win the European Award for Quality Management in the next five years, which will mean embedding quality systems in every single part of our organisation so every service will be European class."

It is the serious intent of a local authority and a chief that have already proved themselves a class act.

West Lothian Council was UK Council of the Year in 2006. It is the only UK unitary council to receive a corporate charter mark – government's gold award for excellent customer service – and in 2007 was the only local authority to reach the finals of the European Excellence Awards.

Chief executive since 1995, Alex Linkston has overseen many major improvements as head of paid service in a council made up of nine multi-member wards, represented by 32 councillors from Livingstone to Linlithgow, Bathgate to Broxburn. He advises the council, chairs the corporate management team and is the first point of contact with the Scottish Government, regulatory bodies and partner public bodies such as health, police, fire service and court services. He has responsibility for emergency planning and encouraging positive relationships with community groups. He was awarded a CBE in the New Year Honours.