

So, Highland Council has a whole lot of savings they need to make. In this time of recession I don't think they are alone. Many employers in the private and the public sector are looking for ways to save money. Of course everyone is trying to make the savings without reducing the levels of service. A wee cut here, a saving there and no-one is any the wiser.

Our chocolate bars get smaller instead of more expensive (and then they introduce a mega-size that we don't mind paying more for). The coffee switches from a rich roast Ethiopian to an instant from wherever. Gradually the standards change but by the time we notice it is too late.

But we'll be OK with the Highland Council cuts, because none of the front-line services will be affected. All the savings will be in administration, in the back office. What does this mean then? The removal of a whole lot of jobs-worths sitting at desks creating paperwork for the front-line people?

I don't know if you know anyone who works for Highland Council, but it seems to me that the vast majority of them are working really quite hard. Of course there will be shirkers, but isn't that the case everywhere?

Not for one moment do I deny the value of our teachers, social workers and bin-men. But do you suppose they would turn out every day if they never got paid at the end of the month? What if the MOT ran out on the bin lorries, or if the school heating got cut off because no-one paid the bill? When our social workers go out to visit a family, someone has provided them with details of where the family live, and a bit of background on their history. Who do you suppose spoke to the schools, the hospital and the police before writing up a report for the front-line worker?

When the Yorkshire Ripper got caught, it wasn't because the arresting officer suspected him of serial murder. No, he arrested him initially for a traffic offence, and one of these back-office workers put two and two together and realised he might be the very man they had been searching for.

It seems to me to be short-sighted to be cutting the back-room workers. They do the very jobs that require a specialist skill, or free up the front-line workers to get on with what they do best. Cutting them back is all very well if what they are doing is unnecessary, but otherwise you are simply increasing the load on whoever is left.

No-one can do everything. Someone may be good with children, but hopeless with numbers. Someone else could be a whiz at public speaking but useless at remembering where they should be and when. Another person could be as strong as a horse, but every time they touch a keyboard, the computer dies. The trick is to have everyone doing what it is they are good at letting others get on with their job.

My worry is that Highland Council will impose cutbacks in the back office staff, and this means that the jobs they used to do will fall to already busy people who are neither suited nor trained for the task and who end up neglecting what they were supposed to be doing in the first place.

I remember visiting a busy police custody office on a Friday night. Everyone that got locked up had to be assessed for drink, drug or health problems; their belongings logged; their background checked out and given their one phone call. Due to staff cuts in their back office, there was only one member of the team available to do all this, so there was a big queue of arrestees with two police officers sitting beside them waiting their turn.

Knowing that any arrest on a Friday night will mean a two hour wait in the cells, and so two hours off the front-line. I wonder if any individual police officer let someone go that under different circumstances would have been taken in and charged? If the Yorkshire Ripper would have been let off his minor driving offence?

I know that I would like the teachers at our schools to only have to worry about teaching our children. That the social workers and cleansing department, the housing team and the sport & leisure

staff can all get on with what they are good at, and that means a team supporting them in the background that may not be as glamorous but believe me are every bit as valuable as the front line.