

BLACK SHIRTS IN BARNET

FROM 2006 until March this year the London borough of Barnet paid £1.4m to security company MetPro Rapid Response for a range of services, some involving contact with "at risk" children and vulnerable adults.

It all came to an end after a town hall budget-cutting meeting at which MetPro guards, dressed in intimidating paramilitary-style uniforms, "contained" residents in a side room and, in defiance of police advice, prevented them entering the half-empty public gallery. The black-shirted bouncers had been secretly filming and "monitoring" the residents, including a number of local bloggers.

It quickly emerged that the company was in liquidation for non-payment of tax and had transferred its business to the "new" MetPro Emergency Response. Neither company was approved by the Security Industry Authority and individual employees were working unlicensed – a criminal offence. None of the guards had Criminal Records Bureau checks.

MetPro had no contract with the Tory borough, no specification of duties, and its payments were unregulated. Last month an internal audit committee, chaired by Lib Dem peer Lord Palmer, produced a damning report detailing widespread failings and financial incompetence on a staggering scale, with no control over procurement or contracted services. Despite all this, "easycouncil" Barnet's plans for massive outsourcing of services continue. The day after the audit meeting, the council published a tender notice for a whopping £750m of contracts.

One contract that *has* been carefully arranged is the one under which Halliford Associates, aka deputy chief exec and chief finance officer Andrew "Black Hole" Travers, gets £1,000 a day. His boss, Nick "Non-Stick" Walkley, scrapes by on £201,000 a year.

Barnet refuses to hold inquiries into the illicit filming of residents, or to establish the degree of risk posed to children and vulnerable adults by its failure to carry out CRB checks. The council claims it's not necessary, because "no complaints" have been received about "inappropriate dealings". Phew!