

Educate the Masses!!

The publication of Sir Michael Lyons' interim findings last December told us what many of us had known or suspected for a long time about the public's understanding of the link between Council Tax and the many services they consume on a daily basis provided by local government. Rather unsurprisingly they don't get it or only have a very basic knowledge of what is delivered.

Most residents in local authorities recognise that refuse collection is down to the Council, some may even stretch to libraries but for the vast majority that is about as far as it goes. Add to this the negative press local government continuously receives (the reporting of the largely positive CPA results being a case in point), an unwillingness at Government level to try to redress this perception and its little wonder the public are sceptical.

So what can we do about it? Continue to be the punch bag for the press, bury our heads in the sand and say that whatever we do the public will not understand anyway? Alternatively we could try communicating to the masses in a style that they can relate to and invest some time in putting across a message regarding the benefits they get from largely well run and well delivered Council services.

Looking at the CPA scores in December the Audit Commission found that over 70% of local authorities are improving strongly or improving well. This is the fourth year in a row that local government has improved its performance under CPA with 98% of authorities delivering more than adequate services and better use of resources. Hardly a bad news story, yet somehow again we manage to let those who choose to portray local government in a negative light sabotage a victory. In terms of efficiency local authorities are leading the way and returning some £58m per month to the Treasury. Mid term reports suggest that local government is on schedule to overshoot the proposed efficiency target this year by some £900m, again good news.

The challenge therefore is to get the reality of local government performance across to the public, along with the breadth of services we provide on their behalf and understand that actually the cost of provision represents value for money.

Added to this is the dilemma of over-inspection. Lyons identified that this is something that is hindering effective service delivery and producing inefficiencies. We agree that councils are being over-inspected at present and this has been recognised by the ODPM in their proposals for inspection reform, as well as the Audit Commission. Any first-class inspection service should reach an optimum minimum level. We would like to see this optimum minimum level underpinned by strong, robust local performance management frameworks.

Linked to all of this is the rise of the Environmental Agenda up the political agenda and this must be viewed as a positive opportunity to re-engage with the public. The Prime Minister's mantra 'education, education, education' initially identified where his

administration's resources would be targeted. APSE lobbied Government and the Audit Commission extensively since the inception of CPA for greater recognition of Environmental Services in the CPA weightings, believing that while Education and Social Services are important they should not dominate scoring to the extent that other services are marginalized. However, now the penny has dropped for Government that the public are more interested in what's happening closer to home and whether their streets are clean, their street lighting works and their parks are well maintained. Frances Done, the Audit Commission's head of local government, recently called on Councils to give more attention to environmental issues within the context of "CPA- the Harder Test."

The fact that the public only identify a few services as being provided by local government has not gone unnoticed by Government and the Audit Commission. Time and again MORI research has shown that liveability issues are the biggest driver of satisfaction with local services. If the new emphasis is put on those services the public care about then public perceptions will no doubt improve as a result along with the value they place upon them.

APSE would like to see a national advertising campaign to educate the public and media on the services local authorities provide to them. We also believe that the educational syllabus should incorporate some explanation of the role of public services. Finally we believe that Central Government at the highest level has a role to play in improving the image of local authority services. If Government want to be judged on whether public services are improving then its time to make a positive contribution not snipe from the sidelines.

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