

Give a little respect!

There can be no doubt that Tony Blair's recent launch of his Government's 'Respect Action Plan' signalled a long overdue significant shift in direction, emphasis and resources with regard to winning the battle in improving peoples perceptions on the performance of public services.

The Prime Minister started out in 1997 with his mantra of 'Education, Education, Education' and some could have been forgiven for believing that this was the beginning and the end of public services so far as this Government were concerned in the early years.

Whilst not belittling the importance of Education, only 25% of the population use this service at any given point in time, whereas 100% of people experience the liveability services every day of the week. By liveability what we are talking about are the very services that are at the heart of Tony Blair's Respect Agenda and at the heart of communities. When you walk out the door in the morning are the streets clean, the roads well maintained, the parks inviting rather than no go areas? When you return home in the evening are the streets well lit, are there good leisure facilities available, does the community feel safe? Every MORI poll on public services tells us that these are the issues that ordinary people really care about and therefore this is how they form their opinions of whether public services have improved or not. The Prime Minister is on record of course as saying "judge me on whether public services have improved over the course of this Government".

The emphasis has therefore shifted significantly to neighbourhoods and the promotion of a set of common values applicable to the achievement of harmony and increased quality of life within communities, particularly the poorest and most deprived.

In the pursuit of respect within communities Government has put together a framework of measures aimed at devolving power to local authorities to seek an improvement in quality of life. This framework is not only about anti social behaviour orders and crack house closures. The central role of local authorities playing a community leaders role in developing their area responses to the National Community Safety Plan 2006 –2009 is not as headline grabbing but just as important. The Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005 bestowed numerous new powers on local government which allow them to tackle environmental crime including litter, graffiti and flytipping these were broadly welcomed by Councils.

Local authorities will play a key role in deciding whether the 'Respect Agenda' is a success or not, but then Councils have always existed to provide local leadership, service delivery and improve the lives of residents in a co-ordinated manner. Lets be clear though, local governments role is about much more than enforcement of the new agenda, if it is to be a success then its going to take targeted investment to eliminate social exclusion and provide better community facilities, as well as communication and education such as the environmental campaigns run by ENCAMS.

The central role of achieving improvement in quality of life, behaviour and communities has been bestowed on local government and much will depend on the quality of services it provides and the leadership it shows. Key change agents will of

course be local elected members who will be responsible for championing the regeneration of their areas. It is of course important that this forms part of a co-ordinated area-wide plan or it will only shift problems on to the next ward or borough. One way of achieving a feeling of community safety is by having a high visible presence and a number of authorities have experimented successfully with street wardens. On highways and local roads, authorities are taking measures to cut deaths and serious injuries by 40% by 2010. Planners have a massive responsibility in designing crime out of streets and new estates, simple measures like better street lighting can have a huge impact. The provision of better sports, leisure and community facilities can give young people something to do and help reduce nuisance behaviour, Newham have already witnessed a drop in crime amongst young people by the improved facilities brought about by the Olympic bid.

Local authorities across the country are playing a major role in the achievement of cleaner, greener, safer communities. It would be encouraging if a by-product of the rollout of this agenda was that local government also received a little respect for their achievements from central Government.

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