

IS THE MINISTER TRIGGER HAPPY?

The Local Government Minister, David Miliband, appears to be ploughing on with the concept of double devolution, whereby Council's will gain more freedoms and flexibilities providing that they pass powers down to neighbourhood level, despite mounting criticisms.

One way in which Mr Miliband has intimated there will be greater involvement of citizens at a neighbourhood level is the use of 'Trigger Panels', in theory residents dissatisfied with services such as street scene services, could opt to end the existing contracts and re-tender the service.

Leaving aside the lack of detail around the concept itself surely nobody would argue against increased citizen engagement in public services. The question is are 'Trigger Panels' an effective way of achieving that?

APSE would question whether the Minister's advisors are fully aware of the progress and improvements that many authorities have made in street scene services. Most Council's have already implemented an integrated service delivery approach to the street scene linking refuse collection to recycling targets; and 'crime and grime' initiatives to their Crime and Disorder Partnerships and neighbourhood street wardens. This has brought about real measurable results. For example, a 28% reduction in crime in neighbourhood warden pilot areas and a drastic fall, from a high of 23% to just 8% nationally of authorities with unacceptably high levels of litter and detritus. It has also brought members of the community on board in terms of acting as street champions in many areas such as Blackburn and projects like the junior neighbourhood wardens initiative in Southampton. It is precisely this kind of citizen engagement that the Minister seeks.

Authorities like these have not improved their services through segmented service provision. They have instead used the resources at their disposal, and new powers more recently available, to bring about a 'can do' approach with citizens. This is perhaps where the Minister's approach to 'Trigger Panels'

creates some real and practical difficulties for local authorities and where many would part company with him. The practical issues are obvious.

Local authority services are co-ordinated to ensure that standards are underpinned by fair distribution and maximisation of the use of capital assets. This could be undermined by smaller more fragmented contract arrangements. The average wagon for wheelie bin collection costs anything from £120,000 to £150,000 depending upon the specification. Lifespan on the vehicles is limited to 5 to 7 years. It is hard to imagine that smaller less efficient contracts, offered on a neighbourhood basis, will be attractive to the market as 'one off' contracts.

Moreover with localised level contracts APSE would question whether the Minister has considered the co-ordination and continuation of strategic policies led by local government. For example meeting recycling targets involves delivering effective strategies, not just across the local authority area but arguably on a sub-regional basis, particularly when we look at waste strategies. Quite how these issues can be regulated within a localised contract framework will be of interest to many.

There is also the issue of EU public procurement regulations. Specific rules govern aggregate contract values. It is hard to see how devolving budgets down to a local level will not be viewed as cutting across EU rules on high value public contracts. APSE would also question whether existing contractors will roll over on the basis of a 'Trigger Panels' opinion and give up lucrative Council contracts or are they more likely to challenge the termination through legal avenues, unless robust evidence of failure exists.

There appears to be a schism developing across Government policy. How can we see the principles of subsidiarity applied when efficiency targets arguably dictate greater use of cross-boundary working and shared services? How can we pass powers down to a neighbourhood level which could dictate the re-tendering of a service when by default that very action could remove choice from neighbouring areas by making existing service contracts

unviable? And where do we value the democratic input of locally elected members as community leaders in this process?

It is a debate that is set to run, at least until the much awaited white paper on local government puts some flesh on the bones of the Minister's proposals.

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