

## **Respect for the Environment**

There can be no doubt that Tony Blair's 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 Respect Agenda is not simply about rogue neighbours that bring fear to the local community but also about creating an environment in which respect for others flourishes.

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 issues (the issues that impact on the public when they walk out of the door in the morning) every day of the week.

MORI polls also tell us that Liveability issues are the ones 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 Respect agenda should neither be seen as something that is 'stand alone' or a narrow moral crusade. Rather, it's inextricably linked to a wider agenda that exists alongside Number 10's Respect Task Force – namely the policies being advanced by the ODPM in terms of Sustainable Communities and DEFRA in terms of Liveability and the legislation contained within the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act.

Local authorities play a central role in providing community leadership and park wardens, highways officials and others are all an intrinsic part of enforcing respect within public spaces. Enforcement can only be guaranteed by the kind of continued, targeted and sustained investment that results in better community facilities (such as leisure facilities and parks). Better procurement and smarter spending will amount to little if councils continue needing to repair and renew facilities in a time of efficiencies. Targeted campaigns are needed to communicate the value of public services, such as the well-designed public education campaigns devised by ENCAMS on the local environment. 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. Successfully delivered services help engender respect because they show that the local authority is respecting local residents – asking the same in return hardly seems unfair so long as investment continues and the area is improving.

The meaning of 'Respect' needs to be extended to environmental and liveability agendas in order for it to take on board a practical and deliverable dimension. 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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