

Street Act Performance

The streetscene is the life blood of our towns and cities. The issues surrounding streetscene are now also reaching the top of the political agenda. However, the most important issue to know is what do the public actually want? Surveys by a range of organisations, be they local authorities, government or market researchers all confirm that “streetscene issues” have become increasingly important for the public. In more details they want clean streets, safe neighbourhoods and greener environments. They want enough street lighting. They like street art and sculpture that is in keeping with the area and add local character. They want streets that are safe for children and older people. They would like clutter removed and some well-designed benches. To summarise, they want to feel part of where they live, not to be driven scurrying from their own streets.

MORI's recent report 'Liveability 2005 & Frontiers of Performance III' suggests that the initiatives by Central and Local Government over the past four years are now being recognised by the public. This is a good start but there is still a long way to go and the powers through the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act will help deliver more. The introduction of powers and measures through this Act enhance the ability of local authorities to bring about further improvements in all aspects of public space. Some powers have already come into force, but in April new powers will be introduced which make greater use of fixed penalty notices, with greater opportunities for the authority to retain the receipts. The publication of guidance (promised for March by DEFRA) to accompany the full range of measures is now eagerly awaited in local government.

It is important to recognise that it is not just about using the new powers however, good design, effective service delivery, good communications allied with fair and equitable enforcement procedures are also necessary. Even the

best designed streets or parks are useless if people don't use them, and the safest spaces are those which are occupied - whether that is parks or streets.

A well-designed and maintained streetscene can set the whole atmosphere for how people feel about where they live – this isn't a 30 minute soap opera on television which can transport people to another place for a few hours – it's real life – the place where people live their daily lives.

The new powers are welcome and deliver significant advances in getting the public to support initiatives to tackle environmental issues. However any perception by the public that councils are using the new powers simply as a cash cow will run the risk of losing the very support that councils need from the public to make the new powers workable.

That is why the need for a twin track approach for education and enforcement is so important. An excellent example in delivering this approach is Stockton where they have developed a comprehensive twin track approach to develop links in the community to report litter, fly-posting and graffiti alongside a strong enforcement team. In this respect, whilst APSE advocates the use of fixed penalty notices as a last not first resort, it is essential to guard against the public feeling criminalised by enforcement powers. Councils need to ensure that there is a strategic and thought through enforcement strategy and that it doesn't become a league table in who can gather in the most income from fixed penalty notices!

But are local authorities using the powers already in place? APSE has in the last year held a number of events themed on lifting the horizons of streetscene services through using the framework of coordinated powers available to enhance quality of life for communities. APSE highlighted a range of good initiatives across the country in its 2005 publication "Delivering the Liveability

Agenda”. Feedback indicated that the best local authority service providers are now developing people centred services that are adapted to meet the changing expectations from communities. There is more to do with excellent service delivery than merely creating living spaces that are clean and green; people also need to feel safe and secure in that environment. For example, in Wakefield in West Yorkshire a combination of the strands has been delivered to give communities services that improve quality of life, give pride in their area and increase self-esteem.

How the public perceive the environment is critical to local authorities success with the bottom line being to ensure residents are satisfied with their services. The challenge is to deliver services in a logical and sensible way that suits the locality. This may be on a neighbourhood basis as at Knowsley Council on Merseyside where they have adopted the use of multi skilled teams to increase flexibility and deliver a whole street coordinated approach for residents. Overall though, the aim must be to match well delivered services with public perceptions and requirements for their area.

However, high quality services to the public can only be delivered with a motivated workforce. It is the role of local authority senior managers to create the environment to allow the workforce to interface with the public in a responsive professional manner. This will only be achieved by making employees feel valued and recognising their importance in the chain of delivery. South Tyneside Council has created an environment where services are permissive, organic and open to change through a one team approach. This approach allowed South Tyneside to become the first Council to jump from fair to excellent in one step in the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA).

The best performing authorities now have effective streetscene strategies in place that set out challenging frameworks based on meaningful consultation with residents that link back into the other corporate policies. In Southampton this

has developed into a strap line vision of “smarter, safer, cleaner city” that is well designed, sustainable with a real “sense of place”. This is by being smarter in providing an environment that promotes and respects sustainable high quality design in buildings, features and open spaces; safer through accessible roads and facilities that are planned and looked after to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour; cleaner through improving how open and green spaces are maintained and how services are managed and delivered in an environmentally friendly way.

Daventry in their vision of “Building an Environmentally Sustainable Future” have identified three core objectives to protect and enhance the environment, deliver healthy, safe and strong communities and individuals and to improve the business economy. In particular, this includes an intention to recycle/compost 50% of waste and a reallocation of resources to meet demand growth in grounds maintenance, street cleaning and refuse collection.

The profile and image that streetscene services can bring cannot be underestimated. The image and reputation of the council can be at stake. Street cleansing is probably the one, whilst not being glamorous or sexy, that can make the biggest impact on how happy people are with their local council. With elections looming, the importance of the streetscene should not be overlooked!

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