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PluggedIN

Talking rubbish may get the punters to vote

Don't rubbish local politics! What is the issue that will make voters turn out in their droves on 3 May in the way that 85% of the French public did in the first round of the recent presidential election?

While some may argue that the huge interest in France is about the national issue of restructuring the country's economy and, indeed, the very way the French lead their lives, in the UK, it is a very local issue that is taking on national significance.

Prime ministerial candidates are all-too-keen to display their green credentials, the national press has developed a keen interest in rubbish and recycling, and the *Daily Mail* has launched a campaign on waste-collection cycles.

So often in the past, experts have claimed the public vote in local elections on national issues, but there is evidence to suggest that this time round, things might prove different.

Waste is the service most commonly associated with local government by all members of the public. If you ask people what services their council provides or what they pay their council tax for, getting their bins emptied will top the list.

Last year, administrations which had introduced fortnightly collections tended to perform less favourably than others. This year, political parties are fighting local campaigns wholly on this theme.

The debate about waste has got people interested in local government. And it's a topic which won't go away. Tight CSR settlements and mounting landfill costs, coupled with attempts to combat climate change, are forcing local authorities to encourage their communities to recycle more. Despite public dislike for fortnightly collections, councils have little alternative. It doesn't take a genius to work out that introducing variable charging for waste disposal is going to be equally unpopular. Councils will have their work cut out to carry residents along, either by incentivising recycling or penalising those who persistently ignore local initiatives.

But this isn't down to councils. APSE's view is that a greater drive from the Government is needed to encourage manufacturers to produce less waste alongside these attempts by authorities to educate the public to change their behaviour.

Rightly or wrongly, circumstances have conspired to make waste collection the hot political issue in this year's local government elections.

We shall see if it matters enough to people to get them into the polling stations on 3 May. ■

Going aga

North Yorkshire is embroiled in a unitary battle with its districts, as **Chris Smith** reports



The unitary debate

A pitched battle is under way to win the minds of communities in the heart of England.

Nowhere illustrates this better than in North Yorkshire, where the two sides are furiously setting out alternative ideas to provide services to a population of 580,000 people.

Historically, the area is used to power being passed around. King Canute returned it to the Northumbrian bishop of Durham in the 11th century as a gesture of goodwill to the Angles of the north.

Today, North Yorkshire County Council is among the final 16 authorities which want unitary status. If successful, it would be a complex challenge in delivering services across a geographic area of 3,103 square miles made up of both urban and deeply-rural communities.

But against them are the seven boroughs which have signalled they have no intention of acquiescing. Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate, Richmondshire, Ryedale, Scarborough and Selby are putting up a stiff fight for survival.

The result is a *Dragon's Den*-style pitching contest between two entrenched groups seeing different sides of the same coin.

One argument claimed as a benefit by one side is automatically a disadvantage in the eyes of the other. The county council's pitch is of efficiency and simplicity – it would create one voice with the people as its sole focus, and develop the expertise that has

made it a four star-rated authority. Chief executive, John Marsden, explains: 'Having more than one set of politicians and officers is added duplication.'

The driver must be to be accountable for what happens in our area, and make it more efficient.

'It's not that it's broken, it's the effort that goes into reaching the point where you achieve what you want.'

'There's a cash efficiency and a time efficiency. With seven sets of people operating in the same geographic area, it's inevitable that there's duplication where one would more than suffice.'

The bid document, *Delivering locally across North Yorkshire*, sets out five reasons why the Government should back the bid.

First, it claims creating a single unitary council would deliver high-quality services. Economies of scale would ensure the best-possible value for money for council taxpayers.

A single body would result in clear accountability for all services, and it would also strengthen engagement with neighbourhoods and communities. One voice would be able to give strong community leadership at local level.

The unitary council would also be a powerful voice, speaking up for communities nationally and regionally.

The efficiency savings total £14m a year, and the new ward boundaries will be based on the present